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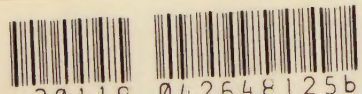

THE PANDERVILS

By the same Author

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And, inter alia,

THE SPANISH CARAVEL
A Tale for Children

THE PANDERVILS

Egg & Nicky

by

Gerald Bullett

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PREFACE

In this volume the two parts of one novel, divided hitherto by the accident of their several publication, appear as a continuous whole: which is to say, as originally planned by their author. It was the tale not of Egg but of Nicky that I sat down to tell, one morning in the spring of 1927: only to discover, after writing a few paragraphs, that of these two Pandervils, father and youngest son, the father, being overscored with the intimate tracery of time, was at the moment the far likelier to engage my passionate interest. I at once conceived the project of making in the thread of my narrative a loop that should hold this father's past history as in a parenthesis; and, after an interval of perhaps a day, or two days, suddenly the dog Fang began barking, the Pandervil acres lay shining before me, and the events of those earlier years, with Egg and his brothers and the rest, came crowding into my mind. I planned to return to Nicky as soon as I should have completed this loop: which in fact I did, as the reader may see for himself. Equally clear to see is the difference between what I have done and what I began by intending: my loop, completed, was found to enclose a story, or part of a story, to which Nicky, my original subject, was no more than a vitally important contribution. So it is that the heart of Egg Pandervil, which began to beat as it were parenthetically, becomes, and remains to the end, the true heart of this novel.

JUNE, 1930. G. B.

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CONTENTS

PART ONE

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	THE BROTHERS	1
II	MONICA	64
III	NOOM'S	126
IV	CARRIE	196
V	FATHER AND SON	247

PART TWO

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	THE CUB	301
II	PLANS AND HOPES	349
III	THE LOVERS	392
IV	THE WAITING	452
V	THE LAST DAYS	492

But, Esora, thy face wears a puzzled look. One thing puzzles me, she answered, for I cannot think what could have put it into his head that he was sent into the world to suffer for others. For are we not all suffering for others?

THE BROOK KERITH

PART ONE

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CHAPTER THE FIRST

THE BROTHERS

I

'And now you're fit to kiss the ladies!' said his father, lifting Nicky Pandervil out of the bath and planting him carefully on the cork mat. 'Or will be,' he added, with pretended fierceness, 'when I've done with you.' Egg Pandervil flung a towel round his son's steaming body and began rubbing him down vigorously. The child grinned his infinite appreciation of the ritual. He liked being bathed by his father, far better than by Selina Bush, who, though kind enough in general, sometimes made frightful faces at him till she became a different person, a person called Mrs Murky. At such times he had to hide his eyes and scream out: 'Oh, do come back, Sleena! Mrs Murky's after me!' And Selina, resuming her proper self, would tell him, with her wide eyes feasting on his terror, that the noise made by the last rush of bath-water through the plughole was the ghost of Mrs Murky threatening to come again next time. His father did none of these things. His father always let him soak a good long time, and always shewed an in-

terest when Nicky said, as he seldom failed to say: 'I say, Dad! Look at my place!' For Nicky, on the inside of his right leg, just above the ankle, had a magnificent 'place', which served to keep in memory how two years ago he had climbed in at the scullery window and stepped into a copper full of boiling water, and, not content with that naughtiness, had afterwards scratched one of the blisters so that it burst and left an everlasting mark, at first a matter for reproach, but now a source of great pride and joy on bath-nights.

'What ladies shall I kiss?' asked Nicky, placing his hands on Mr Pandervil's shoulders to prevent himself being tumbled over. But he did not stay for an answer. 'When you've dried me, will you polish me, please?'

'Dessay,' said Mr Pandervil. Rubbing and scrubbing him with the warm towel Mr Pandervil emitted a hissing sound. 'That's what ostlers do when they rub the horses down,' he explained. 'How d'you like being a horse, hey?'

These two Pandervils seldom expected answers from each other, and still more seldom got them. Though half a century divided them, they were alike in this: that each had acquired the habit of living alone, apart, inside himself. There was understanding between them, imperfect but sufficient for everyday intercourse. During the past year or two Nicky and his father had struck up more than an acquaintance, positively a friendship; for Mrs Pandervil's increasing ill-health threw them together. There were certain things, like

this bathing, that the child could not, at seven years old, do for himself, or could do only under supervision; and, Selina Bush, the Elp, being often too busy with housework to sustain her accustomed minor role of nursemaid, Mr. Pandervil, to his surprise, had found himself playing mother to Nicky, and, still more to his surprise, he enjoyed it—so far as with all his anxious preoccupations he had time or capacity to enjoy anything. He was a worried little man, nearing sixty. Instinctively one calls him little, for though he was of medium height he was slim and with advancing years had acquired the habit of stooping. His head was bald on the crown, but fringed with silken hair that just missed being black; his mutton-chop whiskers were of a pale reddish colour flecked copiously with grey; his eyes were light brown and at once eager and tired; his nose was straight and thin, and his brow deeply furrowed. In moments of indignation, and in moments of pain, he would thrust forward his sharp shaven chin in a gesture weakly aggressive; when he smiled, his mouth widened generously, like a boy's, and his eyes became little suns with fine wrinkles radiating from them. At the moment, but for Nicky, he had little occasion for smiling. The ups and downs of his grocery shop, that bother between Mabe and Dan, Bob's impending marriage to a girl who was no better than she oughta bin, Harold's reluctance to carry on the business, the way the paper kept peeling in the parlour, the big stores round the corner that was

trying to make Pandervil's look small, and most of all Mrs Pandervil's nerves, always, a dismal undercurrent in any reverie, Mrs Pandervil's nerves—such things as these had made Mr Pandervil forget that there was anything in the world so fresh, so unspoiled, so comparatively happy, as young Nicholas. He had made the re-discovery unconsciously, and was only now fully aware of having made it. Nicky was by over ten years the youngest of his children, the errant Bob being twenty-one, the restive Harold eighteen, and Mabe, wife of the unsatisfactory Daniel Finch, twenty-seven turned. Nobody quite knew how Nicky had occurred; it had seemed at the time an unfortunate miracle. And nobody, least of all his parents, was pleased to see him; but Mr Pandervil was by now more than reconciled to the child's existence.

'Dry as dry,' said Mr Pandervil briskly. 'And that's the driest thing there is, I'll be bound!' Nicky, with a beatific smile, raised his two arms like a diver, and chuckled with joy to find himself being enveloped in his nightshirt. He experienced anew that moment of delicious suspense, the fear lest he should be smothered before his head found its way out of the garment. 'And now for bed!' said Mr Pandervil. He seized the child in his arms and carried him like a bundle to his bedroom. Safe in bed, tucked up comfortably and insured against all nocturnal danger by having recited the verse of a hymn and invoked the magic Name, Nicky confidently asked his father to tell him a story.

'Dessay,' answered Mr Pandervil evasively,

concealing the fact that, as always, he was immensely pleased and flattered by the request. His relations with the child were still exquisitely tinged with a shyness that was like the bloom on a ripening plum, or like the tremor of delight that comes with the first breath and the first green shoot of spring. Years ago—occasionally and with little pleasure—he had nursed Mabel, Bob, Harold; but in those days, to which he looked back across the chasm of Mrs Pandervil's nervous disorders, he had been smarting with too fresh a sense of disappointment to take much account of paternity and its incidental joys. Perhaps, had his memory been better, he could have recalled some little stab of wonder in these small lives; and perhaps some faint vibration from the past did in fact enrich, without his knowing it, such moments as he was experiencing now. But if the strings were plucked the music was muted; if the rhythm persisted, the melody was none the less forgotten; and his pleasure in Nicky came therefore with the sharpness of surprise. He was sometimes casual or jolly or playfully gruff with the child, because, being secretly awed by his smallness, his youngness, his coltish beauty, secretly a little intimidated by the clear candour of his gaze, he had not even yet learned to be always quite at ease with him. But for the most part his demeanour reflected Nicky's own joyous gravity. He was happier with Nicky than with anyone else, for Nicky quickened within him the sense—against all reason—that happiness still existed.

'Will you, please?' said Nicky again.

'A story. Dunno any stories.'

'Tell me,' said Nicky, 'about when you were my size.'

'Well,' began Mr Pandervil, 'when I was your size I lived with my Par'n'mah 'n Uncle Algy 'n Aunt Sarah in the country. On a farm it was. Green fields. Pigs'n'geese . . . '

'Reelly pigs?' cried the town-bred Nicky, whose knowledge of pigs, outside picture-books, was confined to the elegant corpses hanging in Mr Catch's shop. 'Tell me s'more, Dad.'

Mr Pandervil, delighted to have made a sensation with mere pigs, warmed to his task, became exuberant, and the bag of his memory bulged with wilder fowl. 'Cows, too, with long horns, Nicky, 'n sheep, *and* a big black ram, what's more . . . ' Mr Pandervil, seeing his listener enthralled, tasted the first sweets of authorship.

From this indulgence a voice in the front bedroom recalled him.

'Eggie, dear!' It was a querulous voice.

The light faded from Nicky's eyes. His father's face fell.

'Did you call, Mother!' answered Mr Pandervil feebly.

A loud sigh, a sigh that resembled a groan. Then sharply; 'Eggie dear! It's only your dying wife as wants to speak to you.'

Mr Pandervil, found guilty of forgetting his wife's sad state, started up in haste, blew out Nicky's candle, and stole down the corridor to the

conjugal bedroom, leaving untold the strange exciting story (thought Nicky) of his earlier life.

2

It was not, by other standards than Nicky's, a remarkable story, unless any human life, involving as it does the paradox of unity in flux and the translation of the tangible world into the stuff of consciousness, offers us a microcosm of the universal mystery. Egbert Pandervil was one of a family of twelve children, five sons and seven daughters, all born (and four buried) within a period of twenty years to William Pandervil and Elizabeth his wife. William was the youngest son of a wealthy Guernseyman; and in 1830, having been cast off by his father for marrying a pretty kitchen wench met during his last year at Cambridge, he had migrated to the Midlands and set up as a gentleman farmer. His gentility was less questionable than his farming, but he continued to the day of his death paying rent to the local pontiff, and continued absent-mindedly, after the fashion of his times, begetting children for whom, as it seemed, no adequate provision was likely to be made. As a farmer, however unsuccessful, he can hardly have been ignorant of the laws of reproduction; yet it was always with a certain air of surprise, and often with some slight indignation, that he learned of his wife's pregnancy. Elizabeth, English and rustic to the core, was admirable both as wife and mother: lusty, good-natured, provident, and, outside her

particular sphere, comfortably stupid. Her children for the most part took after her, and devoted though she was to her husband she was thankful for it. Egbert was one of the fruits of his parents' middle period of fecundity, a period when, after Sarah and William and Frederick, they had begun to feel the need of a more gaudy nomenclature. Algernon and Felicia, as well as Egbert, paid the price of this parental fancy. Egbert was of the three the most unfortunate. The Pandervil boys were all given schooling of sorts, and it was a happy day for Egbert's schoolmates when they found that by calling him Good Egg or Bad Egg they could reduce him to tearful rage.

Egg remembered his father as a gentle ironical man whose permanent mood was one of controlled exasperation; he was bookish, perverse, wrapped in silence; when he spoke it was in a tone of infinite patience more eloquent of bitterness than the most savage curse would have been. He had the air of one who, disappointed of his dearest ambition, takes refuge not in anger, not in the vice of communicating his misery, but in a habit of sardonic resignation. Kindly by nature and in intention, though too deeply self-absorbed to avoid unkindness by neglect, he became as he grew older more and more misanthropic, his silences more pointed, his self-control less sure; so that by the time his son Egbert was fourteen he could tolerate with but an ill grace the least interruption of his solitude. He divided his time between long solitary walks —periods, one surmises, of savage self-communing

—and hours of browsing among books. Of supervising the work of the farmstead, to which he had characteristically given the name of Fipenny Hall, he made only the thinnest pretence, preferring to entrust the fortunes of his family to a salaried bailiff, who, at the instance of Elizabeth, hard put to it to make ends meet, was in due time succeeded by the eldest son, William the younger. Willy, as he was called, had reached his twenty-second year when this burden—the task of wresting a livelihood for his own and his landlord's family out of a hundred or so exhausted acres—fell upon his shoulders. The boy had—so strong was tradition, so thorough his mother's training of him—a powerful respect for his father, as indeed had all the children, so that Mr Pandervil, in part by virtue of his office, in part by virtue of his being a gentleman and a reputed scholar, became an autocrat in spite of himself. His wife never forgot that in marrying her he had mingled fire with her humble clay, and his withdrawal from life, which was in effect though not in intention supercilious, served to keep her in mind of that social disparity between them which he himself had all but forgotten. Had he known her to have been still conscious of her inferiority, still gratefully aware of her unworthiness, he would have been deeply touched and hurt, for beneath the thick blankets of his egoism he was sensitive enough. One can imagine his weak eyes widening, his hands being raised in a gesture of compassionate deprecation: 'My poor dear girl!' But no such revelation

ever occurred; for these two had never bared their minds to each other. Their intimacy was superficial. There was the habit of affection between them, no longer on his part a conscious habit; they shared the same bed and were parents of the same children; for the rest, she served the vegetables and he the joint, and their marriage was a happy one. Indeed, at fifty, Elizabeth Pandervil accounted herself something of a darling of fortune. Sarah, the firstborn, who had shared the domestic drudgery for fifteen out of her twenty-four years, was an increasing comfort to her mother; Willy, the eldest son, was a hard worker; Algernon, besides helping on the farm, brought in a few shillings a week by running errands for the local doctor; and Egbert, now fourteen, gave occasional delicious hints of taking after his wonderful father. The four other girls, from Flisher (Felicia), aged twelve, to Mildred the little four-year-old, with Martha and Jane intervening to demonstrate that morality was not extinct, gave very little trouble, always contriving to wear each other's clothes or suffer their mumps, their measles, their scarlet fever, simultaneously and in the same bed. Yes, Mrs Pandervil had been lucky in her children; two thirds of their number (a magnificent proportion) had survived; and of the others only Frederick, who by now would have been twenty, remained to haunt her with a wistfulness that was the faint echo of a tumultuous grief. Ebenezer, Lucy, and Arthur—it had been pitiful to see them die, but scarcely less pitiful perhaps to see them live,

so small and feeble did they seem; and when she remembered these three consecutive disasters she caught herself venturing, half-conscious of impiety, to thank God that now, as she had good reason to believe, her child-bearing days were over. For Arthur's death had frightened as well as saddened her. The christening curate had arrived in the nick of time—two minutes later, with the magic words unsaid, that tiny body, puking and convulsive, would have been snatched to everlasting fire. Even Elizabeth, an unimaginative woman, could not forbear to shudder when she thought of that. Fortunately she had little time for unproductive thought of any kind, and at this period nothing occurred to disturb her busy serenity except the occasional, the terrible, the dramatic collapse of her husband's control of his perpetually quivering nerves.

One such collapse it was that precipitated the boy Egbert into the beginning of maturity. He stood dreaming in the sun-spangled farmyard, a bill-hook held absent-mindedly in his hand, his eyes dazzled with the gleam of sleek cobblestones, his nostrils filled with the familiar smell of pigs and cow manure and damp decaying straw. Just returned from the fields, where he had been helping his elder brother trim hedges, he now leaned luxuriously against a stable wall filling his mind with vague bright fancies. From the warm darkness of the stable came the sound of Willy's movements and mutterings, and the pawing of the responsive nag grateful for his ministrations; there

was a drowsy hum of life in the air, though summer was not yet come; and the afternoon sunlight beat almost pulsatingly upon his bare head. He was at peace, consciously and lazily enjoying the delicious sensation of fatigue ebbing from his limbs, of sleepiness invading his brain. Nor did it greatly irk him to hear Fang, the old black and white sheep dog, suddenly break into infuriated protest and run into the road. A cart was passing, and Fang was indignant; his years had not taught him to suffer such insolence patiently. Egg turned a languid eye towards the cart as it came across his line of vision; grinned a greeting to Sam Reddick; and lapsed again into dream, hardly noticing that Fang's barking went on and on, cutting the languid afternoon into a hundred sharp fragments of noise. But he did notice that an upper window of the house was suddenly flung open. It was the window at the end of the passage leading from his father's study, that room into which, when the world could no longer be borne with dignity, Mr Pandervil retired.

'I can't stand it any more.'

Mr Pandervil uttered these words clearly and quietly but in a voice that trembled, almost as though they had been a prayer. His face was deathly pale, his eyes were blazing; Egg saw the corners of his mouth twitching as with pain.

Egg ran forward. 'Is anything the matter, sir?'

'That dog,' began Mr Pandervil . . . and for a moment could say no more. 'Where's Willy?' he presently gasped. Willy had already

emerged from the stable and was moving towards his brother. 'Ah, Willy!' said Mr Pandervil, in a tone of ice. 'That dog's noise. Every time anything passes in the road. I can't bear it. Take the animal away, Willy, do you hear? Take it away and shoot it. Yes, at once, my boy. Fetch your gun and shoot the damned thing.'

In Mr Pandervil's world, to command was to be obeyed. He withdrew, and shut the window. Egg felt as though he had received a heavy blow on the back of the head. He removed his fascinated stare from the now blank window and looked upon a world that had become, in a few seconds, crazy and horrible. The sunlight, formerly a splendour, was now a sickly grin. The silence, after that thin cold precise voice had finished speaking, was dreadful, full of nameless menace.

'Willy,' said Egg to his brother. 'Do you think the Guv'nor's mad?'

For answer Willy scratched his head thoughtfully. His plump red face wore a puzzled look. But his hesitation, if he experienced any, endured but for an instant. Thought was an activity beyond his scope. He could eat and sleep, love and hate, fight and dumbly suffer and (as he proved two years later at Inkerman) die in his country's quarrel without understanding a word of it; but to these talents had not been added the power of thought. Best of all he could obey; and now, with the merest frown puckering his forehead, he turned into the house to obey his father. Egg, following close at his brother's heels, could scarcely

believe what he saw; could scarcely believe, being unversed in the world's unchanging ways, that dull wits would faithfully carry out what the sick brain had ordered. Above all things in the world he wanted to save poor Fang, and in his heart there burst into flame an old smouldering fury against his brother. 'Don't be such a great oaf, Willy!' he called. But Willy, though affronted by this unseemly speech from a junior, took down without a word the gun that hung across the kitchen fireplace; loaded it; and went out into the yard again.

Egg ran to his mother. 'Stop him, Mother. He's gone out to shoot old Fang.'

'Shoot Fang?' echoed Willy's mother. 'Deary me, now what would he do that for?'

'Stop him, Mother. Oh, do stop him!' Seeing her look of bewilderment he patiently explained: 'Father told him to do it, but he couldn't have meant it really.'

'Father said shoot Fang?'

'Yes, but . . . '

'Now, don't you be a narty boy,' said Mrs Pandervil, mildly reproving. 'No doubt your father has his good reasons. And of *course* Willy must do as he says! The very idea!'

A kind of terror mingled with the childish rage that burned in the boy's eyes and cheeks. A sense of impotence came upon him—a sense that the world might at any moment go mad and he be powerless to stop it. As he stumbled into the sunshine he could hear the voice of Willy—'Come along Fang! Good dog! Good dog!'—wheed-

ling the animal to its doom. That fellow, that lump of docility, had cunning enough to pat and stroke the victim, and coax him out of the yard. They were already moving away, Fang leaping joyously about his master, encouraged by the sight of the gun to believe that rabbiting was afoot. Egg, staring in dumb misery, watched the two disappear behind the barn. The paralysis of despair had descended on him. He guessed that the meadow called Flinders was to be the scene of slaughter, because the intervening hill, Stally Pitch, would help to deaden the sound of the gun. But why, he asked himself, why this shyness about a mere gunshot, no unusual event on a farm? Would it injure his wretched father to know that his edict was obeyed? The boy, racked now by indecision, whether to attempt a rescue by violence or to wait here till Willy returned alone, could not for the space of several minutes find heart to do anything whatever beyond stand at the edge of the sunlight and stare dismally at his own dark thoughts. Hate blazed in his heart, blazed darkly and dreadfully like ancient night wild with black winds and lit by neither moon nor star. He imagined himself with a gun in his hand and slaying—with a cold anger not unlike his father's—all the stupid people in the world. Violent impulses, running riot in him, spent themselves harmlessly against the wall of his temperamental indecision. In fact he could do nothing, nothing at all, it seemed; but in fancy he saw himself knee-deep in murder—killing Willy, killing Father, killing everything that wantonly

threatened the wretched innocent Fang. And Mother as well? From that last insanity his imagination recoiled, and tears blurred his eyes. A cloud lifted from his brain; his limbs were released; he set off in pursuit of his brother.

The farmlands lay still and drowsy in a trance of afternoon sunlight, but in the boy's mind a storm was raging. He ran quickly across the yard and passed out of it by way of the east gate that gave on to a narrow cart-track bounded by high hedges, a cool cloister of shade from which, scarcely noticing that the blackthorn was already in leaf and the tardier hawthorn in bud, he presently emerged into a region—exquisitely unreal—of flowering fruit-trees, pink and white; and so to the twelve-acre field of young corn, and beyond to where in the shelter of a shallow valley a few score sheep were grazing. After the recent April rains the grass in the green valley was bright with urgent youth, its greenness starred with daisies and lit with buttercups. Cowslips sheltered under the hedges; and dandelions, like little rayed suns, blazed yellow from the ground. But to these rich colours, as to the quivering web of sound spun by the bees, and the lyrical passion of ascending skylarks, the boy's heart was dead. Upon him a shadow had fallen, and he hurried on with no thought to spare for anything except the benevolent lie he was preparing for his brother's ears.

As he climbed, panting, towards the green crest of Stally Pitch he heard the sound of gunshot and knew that he was too late. He slackened pace and

presently came to a standstill, again in the grip of a sick lethargy. But after a few blank moments he resumed his journey, not knowing why, and a dozen steps brought him within sight of where Willy stood, gun in hand, staring down at his handiwork. Young Egbert, still hating his brother, cherished now no murderous thoughts. The time for action was past; the stupid thing had happened; it was over and done with and irremediable, and he struggled to harden his heart against grief, trying to forget the calamity in contempt for its cause.

His brother, by the time Egg reached him, had begun digging the dog's grave. The two exchanged no greeting, but after watching the work in silence for a while Egg inquired in a dull cold tone: 'Where did you get that spade from?'

'Eh?' Willy turned a surprised face to the questioner.

'Where did you get that spade from?'

'The spade? It was lying about up yonder. So I brought it along with me.'

Egg smiled devilishly. 'Think of everything, you do.'

Willy resumed his digging. 'One thing. He was getting old,' he muttered after a few minutes.

'By the way,' said Egg airily, 'what will Algy have to say about it when he comes back from Doctor's? Give you a putty medal, shouldn't wonder, for being so clever.' Obscurely he felt that he mustn't for one moment stop hating and hurting Willy; for in that hatred lay his only salvation from tears. He was bitter and dry-eyed.

He stared at the dead dog with no visible emotion. After a pause he returned to the attack. 'How will you round the sheep up now, eh? Perhaps you'll learn to bark yourself? It's all you're fit for, if you ask me.'

'Eh?' said Willy.

From his blank look Egg could see that Willy had not taken in a word he had said. And he saw, with a shock of something more than surprise, that there were tears in the stupid fellow's eyes. Egg hastened to remind himself that he hated Willy. They had been friends, no doubt, his brother and the dog; and he hadn't much liked the dirty job. But Egg wouldn't be sorry for him. Great oaf, he should have thought of that before! What's the good of being sorry now? Egg's mind slipped back ten minutes, and, carried forward by the impetus of his former plan, he suddenly and without volition blurted out: 'Father's sent me to say he's changed his mind, Willy. Mother spoke up for Fang, and he says not to shoot Fang after all.' He himself was surprised to hear these words.

But still his brother seemed not to have been listening. 'What you say, Egg?'

Egg shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, doesn't matter.'

'Well, now you're here,' said Willy, a trifle truculently, 'you can lend a hand lifting 'un.' The grave was ready, and but little remained to be done. Only a dog after all, Egg told himself. Without word or sign of feeling he stepped forward to do as he was asked.

As though a drop of blood had been spilt upon it, the gold in the western sky was gradually reddening, and the April sun, tempering the sharp sword of his light, glowed now within an ace of the world's rim. On their way back to the house Willy remarked: 'Late for tea, I fancy. Must be nigh on ha' pas' six, by the look of it yonder.' He nodded towards the sun. Egg made no sign of having heard, being absorbed in the task of industriously hating his companion; and presently Willy, as if afraid of silence, spoke again. 'Tell you one thing, Egg. He didn't suffer, old Fang didn't.' Egg strode on, a pace or two ahead, staring fixedly at the ground. 'Twas over in no time,' said Willy. 'When I . . . when I'd done it, I just sorta patted him, and he licked my hand, you know, same as ever, and rolled over dead. And . . . well, that was all.'

'Oh, shut your row, can't you!' growled Egg, turning quickly round.

The brothers confronted each other with every appearance of anger. Then suddenly Egg realized with astonishment that Willy was blubbering and shouting at him: 'You bloody young fool, why coont you stay outa harm's way! I dint make you come, did I! Come out to Flinders a-purpose, I did, so's to keep you out of it. And here's you sneering and sulking and . . . ' The voice broke past control, and Willy, ashamed of his emotion, turned his back on Egg, hunched up his shoulders, and, snatching a large red handkerchief from his pocket, blew his nose with trumpeting emphasis.

Egg was bewildered, aghast. Life had become, in an instant, an inconceivably complicated and mysterious affair; and hating, an almost impossibly difficult task. He was disconcerted, even angry, to find his purpose weakening; disconcerted by this revelation in Willy of something that inconveniently evoked in himself an old affection and a new feeling akin to what he had once or twice felt for the smallest of his sisters, four-year-old Mildred. Blubbering donkey, he thought, or tried to think. But it was no use: the iron of his resolution, the cold steel of his contempt, had melted; and he caught himself wishing that Willy would box his ears, as an elder brother should, and so resolve this problem of what to do next. In default of any such happy termination of the situation Egg stared at the horizon and contrived to whistle a bar or two of *The British Grenadiers.* He sauntered on for a few paces, and when he heard Willy's footsteps overtaking him called back over his shoulder, 'Mother's sure to save us a bit of something, late or not, eh?' And so, without further incident beyond an occasional sniff from Willy, the brothers walked home together, shy of each other, afraid to speak much, and still more afraid lest their glances should meet and confess the newborn love that vibrated between them.

The kitchens, back and front, were populous with Pandervil children. In what they called the back-kitchen, Flisher, Egg's junior by two years, was helping Sarah, his senior by ten, to wash up the crocks and cutlery of the last meal, with the little

girls, ten-year-old Martha and six-year-old Jane, getting in the way by alternately playing shops and clamouring to be taken on as extra hands. Shoo'd away from the sink these juniors started a rival washing-up industry and became very busy cleansing imaginary plates in imaginary water. The game was not a success; for Jane was a child imitative to the point of stubbornness, and Martha was too weakly compliant. If Martha did the washing, so then must Jane; and if Martha, yielding up the invisible dishcloth, began the pantomime of wiping the things her sister had dipped in water, that ritual became at once infinitely attractive to the younger child. Flisher, from the Olympus of her real sink, intervened from time to time, urging upon Jane that this business of washing-up tea-things involved two operations, and that a double washing or a double wiping was profitless. But Jane would not listen to these reasonable counsels; and Flisher, a fair freckled prematurely domesticated child, anxious beyond her years, grew cross with her, and infected Martha with this crossness, so that the back-kitchen became noisy with the broad vowels and the sing-song intonation of Mershire so marked in the female Pandervils. Sarah, plump like her mother and pretty as twenty years earlier her mother had been, cast an occasional glance behind her and said mildly, 'Leave 'er be, Flisher. Why, what a to-do, to be sure!'—an appeal that passed quite unnoticed.

Between this scene of strife and the kitchen proper, where Mrs Pandervil presided over her

sons' delayed tea, the door was wide open; and the three males carried on such manly conversation as seemed necessary, discussing crops and prices and the news from the war-front, to the accompaniment of clattering dishes and feminine altercation. Algernon, loyal to his brothers, had refused to eat until their return, and was now expiating this neglect of his appetite by the consumption, heroic in its scope, of bread and dripping and suet pudding swilled down by half a gallon of weak tea. Willy and Egg were more taciturn than usual, a little unresponsive to the traveller's tales brought home by Algernon, whose casual labour for Doctor Wilson sometimes took him as far as six miles distant into regions seldom visited by his brothers and never ('The very idea!') by his mother and sisters. All three were conscious of a certain constraint in the air, though only two of them, the youngest and the eldest, knew its cause; and all, with no overt sign, turned their hearts towards Mrs Pandervil, the one utterly right and unchanging fact in this world of flux, this maelstrom of Early Victorian modernity. She sat at the head of the table, a huge brown teapot in front of her, and, without ceasing to savour the rich joy of this present moment, chewed the placid cud of her memories. This was her hour, and this her teapot: an hour she never forewent: a teapot whose use she never delegated, even to Sarah, no matter what domestic crisis should be darkening the horizon. The humblest of women, asking only (and not in vain) that she should be made perpetual use of by her husband and chil-

dren, she was at such moments happily and rosily enthroned. Her cheeks retained something of the roundness and the wholesome colour that had once made her, in the eyes of young William Pandervil, irresistible; and time, removing the bloom of youth, had summed up her history in delicate hieroglyphics, a significant beautiful tracery of fine lines. She was not an old woman, and a certain native insensibility had prevented her being too intimately hurt by life's assaults; her youth persisted, and was visible, beneath the thin veneer of advanced middle age; but her everlasting benevolence, tempered only by the rigours of the current code, made her a venerable figure. Slow-minded, uninformed, she yet by habitual kindness showed herself wise. Being as sensitive to emotional atmospheres as she was proof against ideas, she detected at once the undercurrent flowing between Willy and Egg, and she was aware, no less, of Algernon's growing perplexity. It was he who led the conversation and he who sustained it.

'They frosts last week will have snipped all the fruit blossom, eh Willy?'

'Shouldn't wonder,' admitted Willy.

'Bad thing,' said Algernon. 'Wrong time o' year for frosts, ain't it, mother? 'Tis them as cripples it. They frosts, I mean.' He seemed determined that his remarks should not be disregarded for lack of being understood.

Willy was still apathetic. 'I dare say.'

'No fruit at all this year,' said Algernon, after a silence. 'Eh, Willy?'

'Eh?' returned Willy.

'I were saying, no fruit at all this year, what with frosts so late and all. Frosts at the end of April—tint fair! No fruit at all this year. No stone fruit anyhow, by the look of things.'

Egg could see that Algernon was now making a deliberate assault on the ramparts of silence built up by his brothers. Having guessed that something was being concealed from him he was ill disposed to leave them in peace. Moreover he was naturally a talkative lad and he had been away from home all day seeing the world, for the most part through the window of Doctor Wilson's dispensary. Adolescence—for Algernon was two years deeper in that adventure than the nimbler-minded Egbert—had not tied his tongue; nor had it quickened his inventive wit. He had introduced the subject of frosts and fruit, and of that conjunction of ideas an endless series of small irritating remarks would be born unless his sociable appetite were speedily appeased.

'Well,' said Algernon, eyeing his elder brother narrowly, 'if we don't get any fruit this year. . . .'

Egg cried out, almost in his father's voice: 'Oh shut up about fruit, Algy! Can't you think of something else to say?'

Sixteen and fourteen glared at each other. 'Don't you be so cheeky, young 'un!'

Mrs Pandervil intervened: 'Now don't quarrel, boys. Egg mustn't shout, and Algy mustn't worry poor Willy. We're not in a chattering mood this evening.'

Algernon stared. 'Somebody dead?' he inquired with veiled insolence.

'Yes. Fang's dead.'

It was Egg who spoke, and as he uttered the words their significance bit deeply into his mind, so that he became angry again and was put to the emotional necessity of hating someone. This unplacated hunger, like a hawk in mid air, hovered over his thoughts seeking a convenient victim.

'What, old Fang dead?' The shock sobered Algernon. He looked blankly from face to face.

With every repetition of these words, 'Fang dead', Egg's anger burned the more fiercely. 'Yes,' he said. 'Fang's dead. He's been shot dead. We've just buried 'un, Willy and me. So now you know!'

'Who shot him?' demanded Algernon.

Egg noticed that the clatter in the back-kitchen had abruptly ceased. The girls were crowded in the doorway, listening. He paused before answering. Everyone looked at him. Even Willy looked at him. Egg said: 'We shot him ourselves. Willy and me shot him, if you want to know. By order'—and here the hawk, seeing its chance, swooped swiftly down—'by order,' added Egg deliberately, 'of *that beast Father*.' Ah yes, that tasted good.

He was perhaps a little flattered, and more than a little awed, by the sensation that his blasphemy created. For blasphemy it was, no less; the most outrageous utterance that had ever reached his mother's ears. The girls fluttered and trembled;

Flisher failed to repress an hysterical giggle that changed the next instant to weeping; and Mrs Pandervil sat staring with horror in her eyes as though she looked on madness itself. She opened her mouth, from which nothing issued at first but a little gasp. Then she pushed back her chair from the table and slowly rose, wringing her hands and saying in a tense whisper: 'You wicked, wicked boy!' White-faced, biting his lip, Egg tried to meet unconcernedly her grieved accusing eyes. Little wonder she was shaken, seeing him so bold in sin; for she cannot but have feared that this son of hers, in whom she had sometimes seemed to see a trace of the father, was utterly corrupt of heart and destined for a bad end. But perhaps that evil vista was shut out of her imagination by the immediate necessity of punishing the sinner. 'You bad wicked boy,' she repeated, 'to speak so of your father! I can't believe it ! I can't!'

Egg felt a touch on his elbow. Willy was bending towards him. 'Better say you're sorry, Egg.'

Algernon, overhearing the advice, thought to help matters by casting his vote. 'Yes, Egg, say you're sorry! Do!' And Egg's purpose, which had been wavering towards a qualified repentance, stiffened again and would neither bend nor break.

'Yes, I'm sorry,' he heard himself say. And, with a harsh little laugh: 'I'm sorry Father's a beast. But it's not my fault.'

Mrs Pandervil, with a mournful cry, sank down into her chair. 'The Lord forgive me, I've borne a son without grace. He hates his own father!'

Egg, the centre of this storm, stared at his stricken mother, heard Flisher's sobs, was conscious of his brothers' bewildered eyes upon him. He felt himself to be alone in a hostile world, and with no histrionic sense such as might have solaced a more egoistical Satan, he was forlorn indeed. Forlorn and near to tears; but against that surrender he struggled bitterly, for at last, at last, he had realized whom he must hate, whom he must blame. Without question his father was a beast; there could be no going back on that.

The unhappy woman spoke again, sadly but with decision: 'Willy, my boy, you must whip your brother.'

Willy shrugged his shoulders, and after a pause he remarked with unwonted spirit: 'Seems I'm to have all the dirty work to-day. Can't I have a rest same's other folk?'

Being now in control of herself Mrs Pandervil answered quietly: 'Willy, are you going to obey your mother?'

Willy grunted. 'Oh well, we must do as you say, Mother. Egg knows that 'swell as me.' He got slowly out of his chair.

'No!' said Egg. He had suddenly remembered that revelation on the way down Stally Pitch; he stood again in the sunshine and watched Willy's face crumple up, comically, heartrendingly, like a a baby's; at all costs Willy must be protected from this further ordeal. 'No, Mother. Willy needn't whip me. Let Father whip me. Let me go to Father now and tell him that he's . . . and tell

him what I said.' An astonished silence followed this speech. 'I'll tell him, Mother,' said Egg eagerly. 'Honour bright I will!'

They held their breath, these Pandervil children, till their mother should announce her decision. At last she said: 'Very well. Likely it is best so.'

Egg stood up. His heart beat wildly, his face was pale, and his lips were stiffly set. Watched by all eyes he walked self-consciously to the door, and there, unable to bear the silence a moment longer, he remarked, with his fingers on the door-handle: 'He's in the study, I suppose?' Before it occurred to anyone to answer the superfluous question, he was gone.

He tapped on the study door. Hearing no response he tapped again. He was now on the verge of tears, and this delay was unendurable. What he had to do must be done quickly or it could not be done at all. His courage was at the ebb, and he was afflicted by a sense of the sheer silliness of this anticlimax. He tapped a third time, and still hearing nothing opened the door softly.

William Pandervil's study was a country foreign and frightening yet in some unfathomable way attractive to Egg. It was the only room in the house that contained books, and it contained little else. Books lined three of the four walls, from the floor to within two feet of the ceiling; and the smell of their leather hung palpable in the air, an intimidating smell that started a long train of forgotten associations in Egg's nether consciousness. In the presence of so much learning Egg felt him-

self to be a bumpkin, a clodhopper; at such times he shared his mother's sense of inferiority. He was dimly aware that in these books were recorded the thoughts and discoveries of dead or distant men, but if he felt a moment's curiosity it died at once in face of the assumption that such things were not for him. At school he had acquired a rudimentary knowledge of reading, writing, and arithmetic, together with a list, necessarily incomplete, of the kings and capes of England. He knew that Alfred had burnt some cakes, that Charles the First had been beheaded, and that—some time between these two equally important events—Queen Elizabeth had sunk the Spanish Armada. He knew that there were rivers in Europe called the Danube, the Rhine, the Seine, and the Volga—the last because it was the same as a word used by the schoolmaster in rebuking a mannerless boy. He knew, further, that Queen Mary had had 'Calais' written on her heart, and that to describe this queen as 'bloody' was not swearing. He knew: 'Not Angles but angels!' and 'Take away that empty bauble!'; and he knew that the English Channel divides England from France, and that his good fortune in having been born on the right side of that same Channel made him the equal of any three Froggies. These titbits had given him no appetite for the larger meal of education; and his schooling, what there was of it, being now at an end, he had turned with a certain eagerness to more significant matters. The habits of birds interested him, and the queer

look in the eyes of the farm animals set him speculating curiously. He often wondered what it would feel like to be something or somebody else —a cow or a tree or the elderly vicar of his parish; but if ever such a question concerning his father presented itself he shrank from it hastily, the mystery being too dark and dreadful. In the fields he was happy, giving no thought to books or to the dull difficult alien gentility they stood for; but here in his father's study he was suddenly ashamed of his ignorance, thinking himself despised for it. This shame for one instant distracted him from the memory of his crime and its impending punishment. He was further distracted by the queerness of his father's attitude.

Pandervil senior was leaning forward in his chair, his thin vague face sunk between hunched shoulders and resting in the cup of two twitching hands. Staring at a spot on the carpet, and seeing nothing, he was a man lost, utterly remote. He did not look up at his son's entry.

Egg remembered his errand. He remembered, too, that Fang had been shot by command of this man. He blurted out: 'I called you a beast, sir.'

Mr Pandervil emerged from his reverie. He gazed at his visitor with puzzled, patient, weary eyes.

'Please?' said Mr Pandervil, using one of the rare locutions he retained of his native Guernsey speech.

'Downstairs,' stammered Egg, 'I said you

were a beast, sir. Mother's sent me to be whipped.'

Mr Pandervil seemed more than ever puzzled. 'You said I was a beast. But why?' His manner, mild and courteous, had not changed.

'I said you were a beast,' repeated Egg stubbornly. He fancied that this clever educated stranger was sneering at him. Only so could his mildness be accounted for. The boy felt inconceivably clumsy and stupid. Yes, he was stupid; he had made a fool of himself, and everybody despised him for it, everybody was laughing at him, most of all his father. But, stupid or not, he was not going to be tricked into an argument about whys and wherefores.

Mr Pandervil repeated his question: 'But why? Why did you call me a beast?'

A look of mulish and cunning obstinacy disfigured Egg's face; he himself was aware of it, and he fancied it to be his best defence. 'I've come to be punished,' he insisted. To be punished, not to be sneered at and made game of by the man who had read all those books. 'Shall I bend over?' For besides the knowledge acquired at school he had learned the inevitable consequences of such wickedness as his. He had committed a grave offence in the sight of God and man. He knew himself to be a wicked boy, and he knew that if he were struck several times across the buttocks with a stick or switch he would be miraculously made good again, the soreness behind redeeming him from the corruption within.

Whether or not he understood the theory of the matter, of the practice there could be no doubt. If you put your hand in the fire your fingers were burnt; if you called your father a beast, you were beaten. This, in Egg's world, was a plain natural law. And so, impatient to get the ceremony finished, he said: 'Shall I bend over?'

He bent over. Mr Pandervil picked up a long ruler from his table and bestowed five sharp cuts upon the seat of regeneration. 'That'll do, my lad.'

By Egg's standards the punishment was light, even trivial. Even to him it was apparent that there was no conviction behind the castigation; and now, released from his obsession, he was at liberty to wonder what ailed his father.

'And now,' said Mr Pandervil, 'if you will kindly satisfy my curiosity, *why* did you call me a beast?'

Remembering the reason all too bitterly, Egg answered, flushing: 'Because you had Fang shot. Our dog Fang. Because I hated you.'

Mr Pandervil smiled. It was a smile that betokened neither mirth nor bitterness—a queer heartrending smile that suddenly, for no reason at all, filled Egg's eyes with the tears he had so stubbornly held in check. Looking on his father, as for the first time, he saw him as a suffering creature, mortal like Fang, simple like Willy, blundering and bewildered like himself. A sob gathered in the boy's throat, and tears began streaming down his hot cheeks. . . .

He returned red-eyed to the kitchen, where Algernon, noticing his state, came to him with brotherly sympathy, saying, with an arm flung about the youngster's shoulder: 'Bit of a stinger, was it, Eggie? Never mind, lad. 'Tis over now.'

3

On Easter Day in each year Mr Pandervil went to church, because, as he explained to his wife, he took a peculiar interest in pagan festivals. Elizabeth, had she understood the remark, would have attached no importance to it; and in this she would have been right, for in fact Mr Pandervil was a firm believer in the Church of England, which he regarded as a necessary state department existing for the propagation of Christian mythology in the interests of good morals and good manners. Far though he was from being a family man, contriving when he could to forget that his family existed, he would have been troubled and indignant had the Pandervil womenfolk proved lax in church attendance. Fortunately no such disaster was possible with Elizabeth in command. She herself took turns with Sarah in cooking the Sunday mid-day dinner; one went to church, one stayed at home; but she saw to it that her younger daughters (except the baby), and as many of her sons as could be spared from the farm, never failed to set out in two decorous parties. Sarah in her Sunday bonnet and best crinoline, and linked

with her sisters hand to hand, had such a matronly air, and in years was so far beyond her companions, that a stranger might have been excused for supposing her to be a young mother surrounded by her own children. In her left hand she carried the prayer-books; in her right she held the moist fingers of Martha's left; and at the other end of the line was Flisher, between whom and Martha little Jane was supported. Mildred, at four, was left behind, her good behaviour being still a matter more for conjecture than for hope. At a decent distance behind the girls, followed two of their three brothers, sheepish, self-conscious, hands scrubbed and faces polished, and looking—in their ill-fitting, sober, Sabbath garments—pathetically gawky and anxious to please.

To Egg, though he would perhaps rather have been out of doors, this necessary church-going was not an unmitigated misfortune. He did not, indeed, take pleasure in listening to the shrill, brisk, gabbled chanting of Hebrew psalms; to prayers nasally intoned; and to chapters from the Bible read with a dreary unction that invited nothing but open-mouthed, empty-minded reverence; and he did not like that incessant alternation of kneeling and sitting, sitting and standing, which we know to be peculiarly pleasing to the Holy Trinity. But, for the sermon, of which he never consciously heard more than a dozen words, he was vaguely grateful, because it gave him a chance to sit still and lose himself in a rich daydream compounded of the glowing colours of stained

glass, the holy smell of the stove in winter and of warm varnish in summer, and the rise and fall of the Vicar's drawling voice, together with all manner of odd thoughts and random recollections, associated for the most part with other Sunday mornings. From the windows, especially, he never failed to derive enjoyment—an enjoyment sensuous in the main but not wholly so, for the pictures, too, interested him, and he was able bit by bit to piece together a strange world—a stained-glass-window world—in which dwelt the saints and the patriarchs and the persons of the Trinity, all perpetually re-enacting their several parts in the brightly coloured drama that these windows depicted. This world he identified with the heaven into which, if he learned his catechism and did not too often call his father a beast, he would some day be translated. I have said that outside his father's study Egg gave no thought to books, being absorbed in the business of touching and tasting and intimately knowing the things of his own world. So, too, his dalliance with questions of religion was confined not merely within the limits of Sunday but within the time spent in the church itself. Religion, on its imaginative side, was for him a rather agreeable game, a many-coloured reverie to be resumed every week at the moment when the Vicar announced his text. One just slipped back into that other world, taking up the thread of fancy at the point where it had been unreluctantly dropped seven days ago, or indeed at any other point, for there were no rules in this

game. Into this confused luminous dream there sometimes floated—to be instantly invested with a new exotic quality—fragmentary memories of his life outside, his real life; pictures appeared out of nowhere; and sonorous cadences—'defend us in the same from all assaults of our enemies, that we, surely trusting in thy defence, may not fear the power of any adversary'—echoed like organ-music, rang like deep-toned bells, in his mind; for phrases from the very prayers that had been tedious to hear became rich and satisfying in recollection.

In due time another element was introduced into the Sunday morning game by Miss Jinny Randall, at whom both Willy and Egg used to stare under cover of religious exercises: the one for reasons that may be plausibly surmised, the other by force of a perplexing example. Jinny, it seemed to Egg, was by no means a remarkable young woman. She was neat and small and not bad-looking; but, unless poor Willy accounted darkness a virtue, dark hair, dark eyes, a cream-tinted skin, she was no whit superior to our Sarah, who, as everybody knew, was not an exciting person. Moreover, in spite of her ladylike ways and her school-teaching, in spite of the villagers' tribute, 'She *do* talk well-off!', everybody knew her to be the daughter of Randall's General Store, and most people, including Willy himself, had received at her hands bags of flour, packets of pepper, tins of mustard, bundles of firewood, popcorn, bullseyes, reels of cotton, canvas shoes, egg-cups, mop-heads,

string bags, pairs of braces, and other articles of domestic consumption. But three years ago she had been snatched up and educated by a rich relation, and was now come back, a real young lady, to teach pothooks and hangers and catechism to such of the village children as could be persuaded to listen to her. And yet, if one had only to look at Jinny Randall to see that she would never be a romantic figure, one had only, when she was near, to look at Willy Pandervil to know that for him she was romance itself. Her power over him was a phenomenon not to be ignored. Egg discovered it almost as soon as did the victim himself, and a day or two sooner than Jinny; and before long it was common knowledge in the Pandervil household: which means that it was known to everyone except Mildred the baby and William the sire. It was for Jinny Randall's sake that Willy blacked his boots and polished his gaiters with ridiculous frequency; it was for Jinny Randall that, two or three nights a week and twice on Sundays, he dipped his hairbrush into the ewer and laboured to make his hair lie flat and sleek on his head. Jinny Randall was indeed the beginning and the end of Willy. He was born again in the moment of seeing her enter the church after her long sojourn in the halls of culture, and it was some word of hers—Egg never knew quite what—that made the poor sheep finally break out of his pen.

Had Egg, on the night our history opens, been free to follow the train of thought set stirring by

his son Nicky's questions, he could scarcely have failed, gazing back across the years, to see in Jinny Randall the arbiter of his brother's destiny.

But no hint of cataclysm disturbed the serenity of their setting out together, Egg and Willy Pandervil, on that warm September morning in 1854. In the cart five fat lambs were crowded under a net. Willy held the reins; Egg sat at his side; and the ten white miles that lay between Keyborough and Mercester, or Merster, the nearest market town, slipped slowly, flowed meltingly, under their wheels. Egg's mood was easy and indolent. Although he did a share of the work, and had found nothing he liked better, he was at heart no farmer, and it was with no farmer's eye that he watched the fields of ripe corn flowing past. And in the market place at Mercester, having helped Willy to get the five Pandervil lambs into a pen, and listened while Willy conferred for a moment with Mr Fox, he at once allowed his mind to meander off, idly, in pursuit of private fancy, so that the sights and sounds and smells of the market—baa-ing, grunting, jostling beasts, yapping auctioneers, staring farmers—became the mere background for a confused sunlit dream that centred round the ridiculous figure of a goose. At his elbow stood a man dressed in a brown smock and armed with a stick, with which, from time to time, he prodded the back of a fat sow that lay taking her ease in the nearest pen. The sow grunted; the man grunted; the two sized each other up. 'All well at the Ridge?' said someone,

giving Egg's arm a friendly nip. 'Pretty middling good,' replied Egg. 'Ah,' said his friend vaguely, and passed on. The sow had now been goaded into rising: she was not quick, but she could take a hint. And, having achieved his purpose, the man in the brown smock passed on to fresh fields of adventure. The sow lay down again. But soon someone else began prodding at her, and she grunted again. Egg moved away, moved nearer to the goose, which, at five yards distance, had already claimed his attention. The goose was confined in a large wicker basket, alone. It was the only goose in the market, so far as Egg could see; and its solitariness lent colour to his fancy that it was the only one in the world, a unique creation, a highly exotic jest. How many times he had looked at a goose, thought Egg; yet here he was seeing the fantastic thing for the first time—recognizing as strange and individual what had always in the past seemed ordinary. Can it think? asked Egg. Is it looking at me, and does it think I'm funny too? But he did not pursue these inquiries, preferring to enjoy lazily the sensation of his discovery of this bird, staring as a child stares who sees something for the first time, and noting almost with excitement the bright raw beak punctured by nostrils, the violet boot-button eye rimmed with yellow piping, the stiff carriage of the neck, and the creature's almost pompous solemnity. With an air of dignified inquiry the goose presently thrust its beak through the wicker bars of its prison; and when Egg moved nearer,

and extended a cautious hand, the beak, opening wide, revealed the queerest interior—a tongue like a double-edged saw and a mouth with serrated roof.

'Had a talk with Jinny t'other night,' said Willy at his side.

'Did you?' murmured Egg. Well, come to that, Willy often did have a talk with Jinny, didn't he? The goose withdrew its beak into the basket. The auctioneer arrived and began saying in stern tones that this was the best goose he had ever seen.

'Yes, had a talk,' said Willy.

'Whad she say?' asked Egg.

Egg became aware that he and Willy were now hemmed in on every side by bidders and spectators. The bidding had begun. The poultry was being sold, and in particular the goose was being sold. It could not matter to Egg who bought the bird, or what price it fetched; yet he was conscious of giving only half his attention to Willy.

'Bit noisy here,' said Willy. 'Tell you 'nother time.'

Egg took him at his word and stopped listening to anything but the bidding. Yes, someone had bought the goose, together with certain other birds that were being sold with it. The auctioneer moved on a few paces, taking his congregation with him. And Willy began talking again.

'Yes, Jinny and I had a bit of a talk.'

'Bit of a talk, eh?' said Egg.

'We did so,' Willy assured him. 'Might almost say a bit of a tiff,' he added after a pause.

'A tiff?' echoed Egg. 'Oh, not a tiff surely?'

The goose's new owner was now taking possession of his property. A rich joke that bird was, and no mistake. The man untied the basket, thrust a hand in, and seized the goose cleverly by the legs and drew it out. It squawked and fluttered furiously. Some children stood by, watching the fun—four little boys, the eldest ten, the youngest perhaps five years old. They appeared to be happy children, but in a perfect world their noses would have been wiped. Goose tightly and easily held in one hand, with the other the purchaser fished out of his trousers-pocket a knife. With the help of his teeth he opened the knife. It looked a serviceable instrument for his purpose.

'She kind of dared me,' said Willy. He had been telling Egg about this bit of a tiff, but Egg was finding the story a difficult one to follow. And now Egg was conscious of a dull pain in his temples, where the knife had been stuck in . . . but that was nonsense, it was the goose's head that had been transfixed, not his. The goose hung upside down from a nail in the fence; black and crimson gobbets dripped from its amusing beak; its white wings beat passionately; and the four little boys pointed, and nudged each other, and giggled delightedly. When the convulsion ended, the glee faded from their eyes. If only the goose could have been brought to life again, thought Egg, they could have had their fun a second time. But that

was impossible. A pity, said Egg to himself; for he was hot and angry and a little sick; and he was secretly flustered, too, because he could not for the life of him get the drift of Willy's occasional remarks. Jinny had kind of dared Willy—that was all that Egg could make out. But he could see that the trouble, whatever it was, meant a lot to Willy, and feeling ashamed of his inattention he didn't care to ask questions that would let poor Willy see how little of the story had been listened to.

'Of course,' said Willy, 'there's no call to go telling 'em everything at home. But I wanted you to know, because you've got a head on your shoulders, moren some of us have. And—well—I wanted you to know.'

Yes, that was something that Egg did understand; for he would have felt the same about Willy, although Willy had not, as it happened, a very good head on his shoulders. Willy, despite the ten years between them, was nearer in sympathy to Egg than to Algernon; nearer, indeed, than Egg and Algernon were to each other. Egg was obscurely aware of this; and since he had never given it a moment's conscious thought it seemed a perfectly natural thing calling for no explanation.

Willy's remark amounted to an avowal of affection; so Egg asked quickly: 'What did the lambs fetch?'

Willy stared in surprise—'Didn't you hear the bidding?'

Egg confessed that he had been wool-gathering; and when Willy told him the lambs' price he made

an eager show of interest. Meanwhile the two brothers had turned into The Farmer's Rest and now sat down to the regulation market-day dinner. The place was already filled with men, and with the noise of men eating and talking together.

Willy nudged his brother. 'There he is—just the chap I want.'

Following his brother's indication, Egg saw that a stranger was come amongst them, a fellow conspicuously not of the farming fraternity who wore, for all the world as if it belonged to him, the bright scarlet uniform of the 17th Mershires. He was a very peacock among sparrows. With his gleaming buttons, his fine moustache, his loud voice and the proud chevrons of his rank, he looked like the illustration to a patriotic song. Before many minutes were passed everyone in the place was sharply aware of him. His brilliant presence struck so peremptory a note in that homespun company that was like a fire alarum, or the clangour of a brass bell commanding silence. He was the magnet for all eyes. Mouths gaped admiration; voices were lowered; there was a great deal of nudging and whispering and winking; and the serving-wenches went scarlet with a sense of the occasion. The only living thing in the room that seemed unconscious of the Sergeant was the Sergeant himself. Knife and fork held perpendicularly in the two fists planted one each side of his plate, he sat magnificently at ease, waiting his turn as though he had been an ordinary man. Proud, having such a presence, he could not help being:

to call him proud is but to call him human. But haughty he was not; nor domineering. If he knew that his long mustard moustachios were the finest in Mershire, he did not flaunt the knowledge; if he knew himself physically a match for any three of these sleepy agriculturalists, he was not puffed up on that account. His manners were loud and civil. He said: 'I'll thank you for the salt, sir . . . Greatly obliged, sir!' He was respectfully gay with the girls, rising to receive his plate of meat from the eager hands of one of them with a gallantry that almost translated boiled beef and carrots into a nosegay for his buttonhole; and twinkling kindly with his prominent russet-coloured eyes at the lass who brought him his tankard of ale. For a while, thereafter, he ministered faithfully to his appetite, quite unaware, you could have sworn, that all the world was covertly, and with an air of high expectation, watching for what he would do next. If he had been swallowing swords or munching glass they could not have found in him a more fascinating spectacle. And presently their vigilance was rewarded. He leaned towards his nearest neighbour and remarked: 'They're a savage lot, sir, them Roosians!' Flattered and embarrassed by the honour of being taken into the Army's confidence the man addressed could do no more than nod gravely, as if to say that he had already suspected as much. '*But*,' added the Sergeant, raising his voice, 'our lads are a match for them, never fear!' In tribute to that sentiment all civilian tongues ceased to wag: and the

Sergeant, continuing in a loud deliberate voice, yet with an air so heavy with secret meaning as to be almost conspiratorial, remarked to the world at large: 'Though I'm not saying they couldn't do with an 'elping 'and, gentlemen! No, no; I'm not saying that!' And then, having got on good terms with his audience, the dazzling enigmatic creature hastily filled his mouth with suet pudding and munched fiercely for three silent minutes. He swallowed his pudding to the last glistening crumb of fat; took a long draught of ale; and, having sucked the froth off his moustache, he approached the root of the matter. 'I don't mind telling you gentlemen,' he said, screwing up his eyes like a tipster, 'I don't mind telling you gentlemen that there's a few more wanted for the Calvary.' He rose to his feet and signed to the girl for his bill; paid it with pomp; and marched with clanking spurs to the door. There he halted, and then—on the heel of the right foot, on the ball of the left foot, and bringing the left smartly into the right—he performed an exemplary Right Turn.

'Gentlemen, it's a chance in a lifetime! Who's for the Calvary! Who's for swinging his leg over an 'orse and riding to glory!' The gentlemen sat spellbound. Undoubtedly the fellow had a way with him. And as they stared at him his manner subtly changed. A whimsical smile creased his face; the stiffness of his pose relaxed. 'Come, boys!' he said cajolingly, affectionately. And at once these farmers felt like boys and saw this gallant scarlet-coated fellow as the genial father of

them all, a man like themselves, fond of his pint and his joke, and craftier only in the ways of war. A moment before, they had been admiring the man's performance: now, with two words, he had touched their hearts. 'Come, boys! There's fighting and there's fun, there's dooty and there's danger! Who's for the Queen and the Queen's shilling?'

A chair scraped the floor. A young man stepped forward. 'I'm with you, Sergeant!'

'And you've the figure for it, lad!' said the Sergeant. 'You'll look a fair treat on an 'orse. A regular stachoo!' And with that he repeated his formula: 'Who's for the Queen and the Queen's shilling?'

Egg felt a hand on his shoulder. 'Goo'bye, Eggie lad!'

He looked up, dazedly, into the face of Willy. One queer look passed between them, and then, before Egg understood his meaning or intention, Willy was having his hand shaken by the Sergeant.

'Willy! Willy! Don't be a gert fool!'

Egg's shout was the signal for uproar. The spell was broken and the enchanted tongues unloosed. But when the boy would have rushed forward to hold his brother back by main force, a friendly hand gripped him. 'Steady, lad! Steady!'

'Let me go, damn you! Can't you see what's happening? It's Willy, my brother. . . . '

But the Sergeant had already hustled his men away, and when at last Egg succeeded in forcing a passage through the excited chattering group that

remained, he reached the door just in time to see them vanish from sight at a bend in the street—that little huzza-ing crowd, by now mostly children and women, in whose midst strode Willy Pandervil, arm-in-arm with scarlet Death.

4

The Pandervil acres—which is to say the acres for which the Pandervils had paid rent for thirty years—consisted of some seven or eight fields, more grass than arable, distributed on and around a spur of the Mercester Hills know as Saffron Ridge. It had always been called the Ridge Farm, and Mr Pandervil's fancy for writing *Fipenny Hall* at the head of his letter-paper did not for an instant threaten to break down the local custom. If Mr Pandervil was a gentleman that liked his joke, let him have it and enjoy it in private, especially a foreign joke such as a body couldn't be expected to understand. Two centuries old, the house nestled snugly in what might be called the lap of Saffron Hill; for the shape of the hillside roughly suggested a woman asleep in a half-sitting half-recumbent attitude, with her head thrown back; her knees supported the farmhouse, and her ample bosom sheltered it from the north-east winds. The south and the west windows—such as they were—commanded a view of green valleys and of the lesser hill—little more than a bump—called Stally Pitch, beyond which lay Flinders. By climbing to the top of the Ridge the Pandervils

could see, while still in their own fields, almost the whole of the great undulating plain of Mershire lying at their feet, a pattern of green and brown and silver. If in fact they seldom took the trouble to do so, it was perhaps because they had neither time nor thought to spare for the singular charm and interest of their situation, all being busy with more immediate affairs.

The weight of these affairs, in so far as the farm contributed to them, fell now, in Willy's absence, on Algernon and Egg, though their father too, waking somewhat belatedly to a sense of danger, began to take an active part in the farm's administration. Algernon resented being dragged away from the service of Dr Wilson; to Egg it seemed that his brother feared to lose that cosmopolitan glamour which daily intercourse with the outside world had imparted to him. For many weeks he did his farm-work grudgingly, and under Egg's direction; but one day he seized the reins of government and asserted his seniority. 'To-morrow, my lad,' said Algernon, 'we'll finish that bit of ploughing back there.' Had his appetite for authority been satisfied with such a statement of the obvious, all would have been well; but before long Algernon began to get ideas about farming, and then, for all his good intentions, he was a dangerous fellow. He appalled Egg one day by proposing that Flinders, the best grazing land for twenty miles round, should be ploughed and sown with wheat. 'And where shall we graze the sheep then?' asked Egg. Algernon, with a mulish look,

replied that the sheep could graze where they pleased, adding: 'Back up the hill. They'll be out of the draught there. You and your precious sheep!' 'Where should we 'a been last year without sheep?' demanded Egg, 'with corn harvest ruined as it was? Too busy washing bottles to notice, you were! And there's this about my precious sheep—they're sheep, not goats. Maybe you didn't know the difference. There's not enough grass on the scrubby hillside to keep a rabbit healthy, let alone a few score sheep!' Encounters of this kind made for strained relations between the brothers, for, though neither of them was disposed to cherish anger, they fell into the habit of disagreement and so were perpetually wrangling. It made matters no better that Mr Pandervil, when intervention was necessary, always decided on the conservative policy; for this strengthening of Egg's hand made Algernon, smarting with humiliation, fall back on the fiction that he was a man in advance of his time, a pioneer whom nobody was quick enough to appreciate; and such a notion did not help to make him more lovable. Yet Algernon, when his ill-defined itch of ambition ceased for a while to trouble him, showed himself pathetically eager not to be shut out of Egg's confidence. Perhaps his sense of having been always excluded from the unspoken affection subsisting between Egg and Willy had set up in his mind a conflict of which his stubbornness, his singular self-assertiveness, were but symptoms. Egg, who as he grew older became quick in divination of such disorders,

half-guessed the truth about Algernon and began to make allowances for him. He did, indeed, everything for Algernon except the one thing that Algernon unconsciously—or perhaps consciously, if we but knew—demanded of him. He did not, because he could not, accept him as a substitute for the absent Willy. And on the day he learned that Willy had been killed at the front——

It was a sharp winter's morning. Algernon, with the evil message on his tongue, found Egg in the orchard tending a sick cow.

'Bad news, Eggie,' said Algernon.

Egg looked up idly. 'Well?'

'Bad news about our Willy,' said Algernon, beginning to flush and stammer, poor fellow, as though he felt that he was to blame for everything.

Egg's glance wavered, and he moved a step or two away from the cow. All the physical details of the world about him became shockingly vivid and strident, leaping one by one into startling prominence, then rushing together in his consciousness with the effect of sudden assault. He looked at nothing, but sights crowded importunately upon him—the bare orchard trees rigid and black, their limbs twisted into gestures of pain; the cloud of his own breath, solid like marble, tangible, cold; and that monstrous unsignifying shape, that bright pattern of colour, the mutely suffering cow. He noticed, too, with a kind of sick curiosity, that the frozen turf was soft, elastic, spongy, and that it crackled under his feet with the sound of torn

satin. All these things, these objects and these perceptions, were blindingly, deafeningly, prodigiously real and urgent; they offered to a mind eager for distraction from its enemy a thousand minute and curious details each one of which, accorded its share of attention, would serve to postpone by one degree the dreadful, the inevitable moment—the moment when he must turn from this bright feverish little drama and look into the face of the fear that stood at his elbow, watching, leering, biding its time. When at last, after an instant crammed with experience, it became imperative that Algernon should be answered, Egg said quickly, his words following Algernon's with no appreciable delay:

'Willy's wounded.'

He had the air—he was conscious of having it, he was conscious of everything in the universe—of offering this proposition, not as a question, but as a statement which he challenged Algernon to deny. And he knew himself to be gazing at Algernon in a fashion half-accusing, half-defiant, as if daring him to pretend that any news could be worse than that. In Algernon's answering look he saw that his brother's eyes were tortured with a compassion of which he, Egg, was the object. Algernon took a step towards him, mouth agape, hands pleadingly extended.

'Willy's wounded,' repeated Egg woodenly.

'Nay, my dear . . . ' stammered Algernon. 'Not wounded, Willy isn't. Not wounded, boy. He's . . . killed, poor butty!' He tried to add: 'Don't

hate me for it, Eggie!' His voice broke on the words.

Algernon's heart, in all its misery and loneliness, was naked to Egg's sight, but the mind of Egg was filled with a vision in which Algernon had no part. Algernon was heartbroken for Egg's sake, and Egg could feel only a dull resentment that the fellow valued Willy so little as to have emotion to spare on a merely vicarious sorrow. Tearlessly, coldly, he met his brother's mournful, timid, solicitous scrutiny; but indeed he was now but vaguely aware of it. The objective world had ceased to be vivid. The orchard trees, the cow, Algernon himself—these were flat figures on the backcloth of a new series of images, visible and audible, that slid across the stage of his mind. A battlefield, sleek and glossy and full of bright bad colours like the picture of Waterloo in the kitchen, yet horrible with a horror of its own, a nightmare region. Snorting horses, thundering hoofs, the roar and smoke of cannonry, swords flashing, martial music; yes, drums beating, trumpets sounding, everything right and proper, except that above it all Egg could hear the voice of a man hideously screaming, and that in the foreground he could see human faces, scattered limbs, trodden into the mud. He saw, too, a goose hanging upside down, blood dripping from its beak, with children gazing and giggling; young Mr Fox, the auctioneer's clerk, briskly licking the point of his pencil; Jinny Randall in church, singing psalms (seen with a sidelong glance) or reciting prayers (seen covertly between

half-closed fingers); the Recruiting Sergeant munching his meat, a vein palpitating in his temple and his eyes growing big as blood alleys; Jinny Randall again—that fool bitch, said Egg bitterly. And always there was Willy himself: Willy digging a dog's grave; Willy stamping cakes of mud from his boots; Willy in the hayfield tipping back his head to drink cider from a black horn cup; Willy leaning on a rake astride a loaded wagon; and Willy, red-coated, mutilated, misshapen, staring glassily at the moon, alone with his brother corpses. No, said Egg's mind. *No.* NO. But on the face confronting him—for Algernon couldn't for ever be ignored—the truth was clearly written, not to be argued or blustered away. And in that face, in those eyes already brimmed with compassion, dawned a new anxiety.

'Steady, lad, steady!' Algernon's hands were still imploring his. 'Don't take it that way!'

Egg stepped back a pace, mutely declining to be touched. 'Willy's wounded,' he said, for the third time. And, after a moment's staring silence, he turned his back on Algernon and walked slowly, woodenly away. . . .

And not for some weeks did Algernon dare to mention Willy again, although, as Egg couldn't but be aware, there was nothing he wanted more than to talk the matter out. For a while, intimidated by Egg's savage silent grief, he kept a strict guard on his speech, so that—in the consciousness of both brothers—whenever they were together it was as if the ghost of Willy stood between them.

Yet finally, when what had to be said was said, the words fell naturally enough on ears that had forgotten to expect them.

'''Twas just such another day as this,' said Algernon, 'when Willy came home in his regimentals. You 'member, Egg?'

'Ay.'

'Sort of far away, he was, like a stranger,' said Algernon.

Egg gave no sign of being astonished. But astonished he was. It was a shock to him to discover that Algernon had perceived Willy's absent-mindedness. Willy had listened and talked as of old; had eaten with his accustomed gestures; and had slipped back, after perhaps an hour of stiffness in his gait, into the slow swinging stride of one who has spent his life crossing ploughed fields. To all chaff he replied with his old grin; and once, when sharp-eyed Flisher had spoken the name of Jinny Randall, he had blushed. Yet in spite of these familiar manifestations Egg had been conscious that Willy was absent from them; that bull-necked Sergeant, or his like, had done something to change Willy, or rather to drive the real Willy into hiding; and while others admired and clapped their hands and said, 'You do look a smart one!' Egg held his peace, hating the red coat of servitude. He hated it still more in retrospect, believing that it had in part obscured his last sight of Willy. His mind set moving by what Algernon had said, what part, he asked himself, had Jinny played during that brief leave? The question lingered with him

for some days, and at last, as if in answer to it, Jinny herself appeared. They met down the road, a few yards from the house: he in his working clothes, she in bonnet and crinoline.

'Arfnoon, Miss Randall,' said Egg. And was for passing on; but Jinny lingered, and he could not quite bring himself to snub her.

'Oh, Egg, I wanted to speak to you.'

He waited for her to continue. He was ill at ease, for he was still nursing anger against her, the more resolutely because she had not died of grief. Moreover her dress made the occasion a formal one; she was no longer the familiar Jinny Randall, of Randall's Stores, nor yet the Miss Randall he and Willy had watched in church: she was a call-paying lady.

'I wanted . . . ' faltered Jinny again, 'to speak to you.'

'Mother's up at the house,' suggested Egg. For it was impossible that Jinny should want him.

'Yes, I'm paying a call on Mrs Pandervil. But . . . but you first, because . . .' He noticed that her usually sallow face was flushed, and that there were dark rings under her dark eyes. She was, to his view, more definitely a woman than she had ever been before; he was aware of some force in her which, had it not faintly repelled, might have fascinated him; but being a few months short of eighteen against Jinny's mature twenty-three, he was at a loss to understand why Willy had loved her. 'Because,' stumbled Jinny. 'because Willy said . . .'

At the mention of that name Egg tried to harden his heart against her. 'Never mind,' said he shortly. 'Mother's up at the house if you'm wanting her.'

The rebuff made Jinny widen her eyes in wonder. 'But won't you do something for me?' Her tone was humble, almost pleading. 'Willy said you would. He thought a terrible lot of you, Willy did. It was always Egg this and Egg that,' These last words carried a hint of weariness, even a hint of resentment; and Egg, seeing her to have been once jealous of him and feeling her to be no longer so, was conscious that in himself, too, anger had suddenly died. That Willy had loved this woman was still matter for astonishment, but that she had loved Willy brought her within range of Egg's understanding. He could not, however, find any answer for her.

'I was to come to you in any trouble,' Jinny breathlessly added. 'That was one of the very last things he said to me.'

'Are you in trouble now?'

She nodded. 'And I want you to take me to your mother, Egg, please. And stay in the room with us.'

'Why?' asked Egg, with a look as unsympathetic as his voice.

A blush began flooding her face; she put up her hands to hide it. Egg, thinking she was about to weep, at once repented of his harshness.

'Won't you tell me why?' he said mildly.

She faced him again, saying: 'It's just a whim,

Egg. I don't want to be alone with your mother. I'm nervous of her, but if you're there I shan't mind so much, because you and Willy understood one another.'

'Mother won't eat you,' said Egg.

'Will you do this for me?' she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, all right. But if Mother asks me to go out of the room I shall have to, shan't I?' He was, indeed, acutely uncomfortable at the thought of overhearing a conversation the purport of which could already be guessed. But to refuse her request, in the face of all that had been said, would have made him more uncomfortable still. In his heart he said: Why am I so soft about things?

The visitor was received in what Mrs Pandervil called her parlour, a sunless intimidating room that was so seldom used as to have entirely escaped the beneficent infection of humanity. Two stuffed birds in glass cases stood one each side of the mantelpiece, with a clock, a pair of tall vases, and two glass lustres coming between them. These objects were reflected in the large overmantel mirror, but it might be urged in its defence that the reflection was not accurate. The walls with their dark blue pattern of which the recurring theme was a bunch of grapes twining round the stalk of a peony, were plentifully sprinkled with family records—a greatly enlarged photograph of Mr Pandervil at twenty-five, another of Mrs Pandervil nursing her first baby, silhouette portraits of Mrs Pandervil's parents, and a sampler done by Sarah Pandervil at

the age of eleven and a half—but these human evidences singularly failed to alleviate the spiritual deadness of the room.

'Well, Jinny, how are you, my dear, and all at home? You'll stay to a cup of tea, won't you?' Seeing that Egg hovered in the doorway Mrs Pandervil added, with a smile: 'Be off with you, my boy. Jinny's come to talk to me. We don't want young men about us, do we Jinny?'

For answer, catching an imploring look from the girl, Egg diffidently stepped into the room and shut the door behind him. 'She asked me to stay, mama. Made quite a point of it, she did. Do you mind?'

Jinny said quickly: 'Yes, Mrs Pandervil. I asked Egg to stay. Please let him. It's about Willy that I've come, and Willy said . . .'

Bright-eyed, the two women faced each other; the one alert, suspicious; the other already afraid and faltering. Egg, staring almost agape, was aware that the relationship between them had in an instant changed. In Jinny's face the flame of her secret mounted; the light in his mother's eyes was like the glint of steel. That one word, 'Willy', had made division where formerly there had been on his mother's part nothing but goodwill, tinctured, perhaps, with curiosity; and, on Jinny's, nothing but timid hope. Now, for an instant, they were at primitive enmity: jealous, implacable, ripe for murder.

'Ah!' sighed Mrs Pandervil. With a satisfaction in which was a hint of cruelty—Egg's stare

became incredulous—she watched the girl's confusion. 'I think we'll sit down, maybe.' They sank into chairs opposite each other. Egg remained standing by the door, forgotten by both of them.

'Well, Jinny Randall,' said Mrs Pandervil, 'what have you to say about my Willy?'

The girl raised her eyes from the ground. 'He was *my* Willy too, Mrs. Pandervil. That's what I came to tell you.'

Mrs Pandervil answered nothing. Her lips were set in a hard line, her gaze was unrelenting. She waited to hear more, yet contrived to let it appear that whatever more was said could not greatly interest her.

'He was mine, Mrs Pandervil,' Jinny repeated. And after a pause she added, in a breathless whisper: 'And I'm near my time.'

'Ah!' said Mrs Pandervil again. 'So that's it!' She turned in her chair. 'Egbert, this is no place for you.'

Egg, standing his ground, made no answer. That he should leave Jinny to the mercy of this strange woman, this mother he had never seen before, was out of the question. He was in the presence of something alien, monstrous, half-insane—something to which he could not even try to give a name; and he felt as perhaps a man may feel when for the first time he hears the sound of turning thumbscrews and creaking rack. Hatred and terror surged in the silent room; pain quivered into life but uttered no cry. To his secret sense, sword met sword, and the treacherous dagger flashed and fell;

yet still unmoving, still without words, the antagonists gazed at each other.

Presently the older woman got out of her chair, stepped rigidly a pace forward, and began speaking in low angry tones, while Jinny sat staring and flaming at the ground, twisting and untwisting her fingers. Egg—so oddly did the scene strike him—hardly listened to the words that were said. If these two women had been made of wood, they and their gestures could not have seemed to him more queer and stiff and unlifelike. He was bewildered by the release in his mother of a personality utterly strange to him. He had seen her angry; he had seen her sternly judicial; but he had never before been allowed to lose his sense of a fundamental kindness in her, and the experience was so shocking as to falsify everything that was said, everything that happened. The spate of denunciation flowed past him, so that he did not consciously hear it; but, after it was past, chance phrases returned to him to mingle with his circling thoughts. The whole story of Willy, so far as he knew it, repeated itself in his mind in a series of little bright pictures; and behind these pictures moved the drama, as Egg's fancy conceived it, of Willy's love story, beginning with that critical Sunday morning when a translated Jinny Randall walked up the aisle of the church, and ending with the secret passionate farewells of lovers who were never to meet again. Between that first scene and this last there came numerous homely memories that for Egg were more significant: of Willy, red-

faced and eager-eyed, earnestly polishing his boots and gaiters before setting out to pay his respects to Jinny; of Willy plastering down his hair with water in front of the bedroom mirror; of one evening especially when Willy swore wild oaths—all but wept—because at the last moment his braces broke; and of Willy plucking at one's sleeve in church, generously ready, naively eager, to share the ecstasy of seeing Jinny first appear. These visions flashed by, these echoes sounded, and—— Aren't you ashamed of yourself, miss! Enticing my poor boy. Sly tricks. Sent him to his death. No better than a whore, as God's my judge . . . Such fragments as these he found recently written on his mind, and coming upon the vilest of them he suddenly—minutes after the words had been spoken —broke out with a passionate cry:

'Mother! Mother!'

Mrs Pandervil turned on him quickly—in anger, maybe, but still more in surprise. Her eyes pierced a question at him.

'Mother, you've said enough. You've said too much. I think . . . I think you've lost your senses.'

'Hold your tongue, child! How dare you speak to your mother so!'

Egg heard himself shouting: 'I'm not a child and I won't hold my tongue. Willy promised I'd stand by her, and I will. She's not what you say.' He moved half-blindly towards the girl and held out a hand to her. 'Come along. I'll take you back home.'

Staring dazedly up at him, Jinny answered: 'I can't go home. I daren't. They've turned me out.' She rose slowly to her feet. 'But of course I can't stay here either.'

'No, that you can't,' declared Mrs Pandervil. 'The very idea!'

Egg detected a subtle change in his mother's voice, but he could not spare eyes for her, being vigilant to see any new sign on the face of Jinny. And, indeed, at that very moment, a spasm of pain twisted the girl's lips, blanched her cheeks, made her dark eloquent eyes stare wildly like those of a tortured animal. She swayed, and, stretching out a hand to steady herself, fell into Egg's arms.

'She's fainted,' gasped the boy.

Mrs Pandervil opened the door. 'We must carry her upstairs, to Flisher's room. Ah, the disgrace of it! The wickedness!'

'I'm not fainted,' murmured Jinny. 'I can walk. Let me go.'

She leaned heavily on Egg's arm; Mrs Pandervil supported her on the other side. 'Poor deary, the pains are on her. Steady now, and we'll put you to bed.'

'Let me carry her, Mother. She's no weight.'

He lifted the girl from the ground, and with her arms clinging round his neck he felt Willy's strength flowing in his veins and rippling in his muscles. The burden was a heavy one, but he supported it with ease, his mind fixed on the task yet able to afford hospitality still to all manner of random thoughts. His step was confident, care-

ful; his heart joyous. Jinny, her head sinking on his shoulder, moaned in pain; but he mounted the stairs exultantly, conscious of his mother hovering in the rear, and half-conscious of the fancy that it was Willy himself he was carrying in his arms. When, after a long journey, a crowded little interval of time, he at last laid down his precious burden on the bed, he heard the voice of Mrs Pandervil, a mother newly restored to him, murmuring: 'There, there, my lamb! We've got you safe! Mother's got you!' And he realized with a pang that indeed something living, something that was marvellously and mysteriously Willy, was struggling to be born into the world of light.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

MONICA

I

During all that winter he had been from time to time aware of the little prickings of a new revelation, of something struggling—as the child had struggled in Jinny's womb—to be born in his consciousness; and when orchards flowered again, and hedges became warm with the first scent of hawthorn, the world of sense seemed burdened for him with a secret message whose purport he could not as yet surmise. Jinny's child, although it bore traces of being Willy's too, ceased, soon after it was born, to hold any strong interest for him. It was a baby like other babies. It lacked teeth; it lacked hair; it was very small; and it was called, inevitably, Billy. Egg liked the creature well enough and would have done anything in reason for its comfort and safety, but he was aware of it as an organism rather than as an individual. He took pleasure, however, in observing Jinny's maternal infatuation; and was satisfied that there would be no more talk of turning Jinny out. Mrs Pandervil—not maliciously, perhaps not willingly, but rather as a matter of plain duty—had advertised her sense of the danger of exposing her daughters to such moral corruption as Jinny stood for. But

the balance of opinion was against her; even Sarah, plain and precise and in imminent danger of becoming an old maid, begged her not to mention the matter again, lest it should reach the ears of the young mother herself. In fact, against all the canons of decency and justice, the sinner was made much of, and the child of sin waxed fat. The Pandervil girls competed jealously for its favour; Mr Pandervil, on one occasion, made an indulgent clucking noise at it; and even Algernon, now a fervent farmer, had his sentimental moments. Egg alone, Egg who had first championed its cause, appeared but mildly interested in the child. He already, in a sense, was settling down into the routine of hard healthy drudgery, eating, sleeping, working. Everything that happened, happened; he had almost ceased to wonder why; and he had, for the time being, quite ceased to bother his head with those queer speculations about other people's lives, other creatures' lives, which had once occupied his private thoughts. He had become self-absorbed, troubled by a sense of something beyond, something just out of reach, to which he was perhaps moving. Anonymous expectancy agitated his few reflective moments.

Crossing the farmyard one crisp May morning, his arm hooked under the handle of a bucket half full of bran mash, his eyes staring at the sunlit cobblestones, Egg Pandervil moved unconsciously into his new life. A shadow fell across his path; a voice greeted him, cool and clear as running water; and he looked up to see a young girl stand-

ing before him—dark, cool, and neither tall nor short, the plump oval of her face shadowed by a sunbonnet. Yes, she was visibly a girl, an ordinary mortal young woman; young and dark, younger than himself; young and dark and seductively soft, like a warm summer night spent lying in long grass naked and abandoned, drowsily aware of the rise and fall of earth's ample bosom. He was bewildered as by unexpected music poignantly sweet, so that for a moment he could do nothing but stand and stare at her, stupid with wonder.

She, as if to explain her presence, held out for his inspection a milk-can. She repeated the request he had been too deeply shaken to notice. 'May I have an extra pint, please, for Mrs Wrenn?'

Egg put down his bucket with a clang. 'Pint of milk, did you say?'

'Please. It's for the Vicarage. I'm their niece.'

'Oh, yes. Certainly. A pint of milk.' He did not offer to take the milk-can from her. He stood quite still, not knowing what to do, and not caring, being empty of thought. He wanted nothing; he was content. But presently, after a perceptible hiatus, it came upon him, piercing his armour of bliss, that something had to be done. Already he had realized the propriety of not staring too boldly into the kingdom of heaven, and had glanced, with guilty abruptness, at his boots. And now there was this other matter—a pint of milk. 'You did say a pint, didn't you?'

'Yes, a pint. We've had our usual quart, but Auntie sent me to get a pint more. Ought I to call

at the house for it? I expect I ought. How stupid of me!'

'Oh, no!' He took the milk-can from her hand. 'I'll . . . I'll fetch it for you. Won't you . . . ' He nearly said: 'Won't you sit down?' And he blushed for the absurdity, as though she had read the words in his mind. Seeing his confusion she could not but smile faintly and lower her eyes. The universe burst into song.

In the dairy, which was cool and dim after the brightness outside, he found his sister Flisher. He handed the milk-can to her, for it was understood that, in the dairy, men were definitely subordinate not merely to their mother but even to their sister, if it were Sarah or Flisher. 'Someone from the Vicarage wants a pint of milk.'

'Who is it?' asked Flisher, as she filled the can.

'Someone from the Vicarage,' said Egg.

'Yes, I know, silly. But *who?*'

'How should I know? A girl. Vicar's niece or something.'

'That'll be the Monica Wrenn they were telling of,' said Flisher. 'I'll take it to her. Where is she?'

Egg was already at the dairy door, with a pint of milk for which he would if necessary have paid with an equal quantity of his life's-blood. 'She's waiting outside. I've got to go that way.'

He stepped quickly out of the dairy, in terror lest the apparition called Monica Wrenn should have vanished, leaving the earth desolated. But

no, she was still there, incredibly actual. She stood gazing intently at distance, her chin resting on a long white forefinger; but at Egg's approach her attitude stiffened with a hint of delicious awkwardness.

'Thank you very much. And Auntie says will you please put it to the account.'

Egg, with great difficulty, blurted out the speech his mind had been busy preparing for him. It was neither a long nor a bold speech; yet he stammered in its delivery and went very red in the face, and almost forgot his words. 'Did you . . . I mean, did you come through the orchard . . . the orchard way?'

'Oh, yes,' she said. And, marvellously, her voice rose on the second word, instead of falling as that of a Mershire girl would have done. It rose in a heavenly flight; rested for an instant; and then vanished—a melody in two notes, delicately and excitingly inconclusive, so that Egg, filled with longing to find some way of making her say 'Oh, yes' again, had hardly wit enough to understand her when she added: 'It's the only way, isn't it, except by the road? . . . Good morning!'

And not until she was gone, leaving tumult behind her, did he interpret her remark as an ironical comment on his question. Since she had approached the farmhouse through the yard she could have come only by way of the orchard. He stood convicted of making idle conversation; and perhaps, he thought, she already guessed what secret compulsion it was that had put him to that trouble.

This alarming and delicious possibility inspired him with the notion of leaving his bucket where it stood and boldly following her . . .

He overtook her in the orchard, where indeed she lingered, as she could not but do; for in that entranced and softly breathing world, that momentary embodiment of an ideal loveliness, nothing was easier than to lose all sense of affairs in contemplation of the incredible blossom, the cool live grass sprinkled with sundrops, and the delicate clear pattern of song spun by birds and bees. Egg's heart was beating noisily and his mind was busy trying to invent plausible excuses for this pursuit of her; so that he plunged into the orchard with no thought for its beauty, awkward, eager, self-conscious, and troubled by a hundred doubts and fears. But when he saw her standing quietly reflective under a tree, his agony diminished; and when he saw that she was aware of him and yet did not take flight, he with a sense of infinite release forgot himself. He approached her slowly, easily, drawing life from the glance of her intent dark eyes; and, as he moved forward, the orchard grew up around him, glowed into life in his consciousness as though it were but an emanation of herself. He saw her indeed as the meaning of the orchard, and its sufficient cause; saw her as the meaning and epitome of all the loveliness he had ever seen, and of all the greater loveliness he had sometimes—and with a pang like that of home-sickness—dimly desired. She was, quite simply, everything; she had destroyed his world and created a new one in its

place. His belief in her perfection, his sense of her as the fulfilment of life, was profound and irrational and unassailable; he was lost, lost in heaven; he was dead and buried and risen again, seeing the eternal light and walking the fields of blessedness. But this moment could not endure for ever; sooner or later, speech must ensue, and with speech would come back all the old hesitancies and humiliations. He was afraid to speak, but the fear did but heighten his bliss by setting upon it the seal of impermanence. He approached within three feet of her, saying not a word; and they exchanged a long wondering look, in which love was not so much confessed as innocently assumed and marvelled at. It was as if looking in each other's eyes they saw not themselves, not each other, but a vision of so great beauty that they stood appalled, speechless. For Egg, this moment and the moment after—the moment of shy first love, when becoming again conscious of each other they fell into confusion—were indeed real life, the purest rapture that he was ever to know; for this his heart had waited and hungered, and in this scale—unconsciously—all alien joys were to be weighed and found wanting. Yet what was happening between them these two hardly knew; they were glad or bewildered, their minds lagging behind their intuitions. No specific thought of love had as yet come to disturb the peace in which they were united. But he noticed in her eyes, the next instant, a hint of trouble, the shadow of sweet pain; and in that same pulse of time he was aware of the sword of

division flashing between them. They had been made one for an eternal moment; and all the song and heartache and pulsing radiance of spring were darkness and death compared with that moment. But now they were back again, he and she, in time and circumstance, in a world where young men and maidens could not stand for ever wordless, on so short an acquaintance, taking their heart's fill from each other's eyes. Their mutual scrutiny had been, in fact, not long but deep; infinite beatitude crammed into a few seconds of the clock. And now, compelled to say something, Egg said: 'May I carry the milk for you?' And he took the can from her. She turned to continue on her way, and he walked, with downcast eyes and wildly beating heart, at her side. Daisies were in the grass, and buttercups; which, with the bright grass itself, made music in his heart. There was suddenly too much beauty in the world; it snatched his breath away; it assaulted his strength, so that his knees trembled and he found himself unable to speak even when words offered themselves to his dry lips. The vivid orchard that stabbed him with bright colours—this he tried resolutely to fend away. It hurt him to remember that the minutes were flowing undeviatingly into the past, and that in a little while there would be nothing left of this experience but memory; yet that, too, was an exciting and mysterious thought, within which, if only one could deeply penetrate it, reality itself, the very stuff and secret of life, lies hidden. Egg, unaware of the problem, was nevertheless

aware of an excitement induced by its proximity; and so, though the half of him protested like a child, he felt it to be exquisitely fitting that she should turn to him at the orchard's edge and say: 'You mustn't come any further.'

'Why?' he answered.

She half-smiled. 'Because I say so. Give me the milk, please.'

The ecstasy of being commanded by her! The ecstasy of obeying her and hurting himself by that obedience! 'Will you come again some day?'

'I might,' she said, and in her lovely exciting singsong she added: 'Or I mightn't.'

'To the orchard, I mean. Will you?'

'Perhaps.' Her eyes shone with laughter, though her lips were demure. 'I'm not telling you.'

He was entranced; his spirit was crying out with happiness; but he didn't know what next to say or do. After an awkward pause he said: 'You're the Vicar's niece, didn't you say? You're . . . '

'Monica. Monica Wrenn.'

'I'm Egg Pandervil. Funny name, isn't it?'

She laughed. 'Is it funny? . . . Egg Pandervil. Yes, it's rather funny.' And then, without saying goodbye, she was gone.

She was gone, and the brightness of the morning, being so greatly diminished, became endurable. This was visibly, none the less, the first morning of creation, with the gold of the sun new-minted, and the air fresh and the grass green as never before. Everything in the world was aflame for him with

individuality. The process of lifting the gate open and feeling it swing back; the spring of the turf, elastic under his feet; the rustle of his own footsteps in long grass—each of these things possessed a quality and a joyous significance. And in the shelter of the hedge he found a cowslip, startling as a miracle.

He strode back to the yard, from which he had been absent for but a few minutes; and, taking up his bucket again, yielded its contents to the hungry pigs. Then, with an unexplained grin at Algernon, who happened across his path at that moment, he put a bridle on Daisy, the most vigorous of the mares, and led her out to the plough.

Egg addressed himself to his task with a queer exultation. The field was to lie fallow for this year; it was, as Algy had said, a stubborn bitch of a field, for it would grow nothing but quitch and charlock; but this morning Egg loved it. He admired Daisy too—her glossiness, her strength, the intelligent resignation in her oily brown eye; and as he made ready to cut the first furrow his glance noted appreciatively her straining leg-muscles and shaggy hocks. He gripped the handles of the plough and spoke a word to the mare. She moved forward; the revolving world kicked at the plough, making it rattle; but the next moment the shares bit deeply, and rich parings of earth began multiplying at the side of the lengthening furrow. The field rose in a gradual convex curve towards the steep hillside that mounted to Saffron Ridge; and Egg, as he crested its convexity, ploughing

with a glad passion such as he had never known before, was uplifted with a sense of conquest, fancying himself aware of the earth as a many coloured globe rotating under him. His energy seemed inexhaustible; and as the day grew hotter he felt its radiance pulsing in his veins. At noon, returning late for dinner, he found that Monica, the centre of his universe, was even here the centre of discussion, notwithstanding that Flisher was the only other member of the family who could claim to have seen her.

'Here's Egg,' cried Algernon. 'He'll tell you all about it. Now, Egg, speak up, lad! What's the wench like?'

'Do you mean the girl from the Vicarage?' asked Egg innocently. 'Oh, she's well enough.'

'What did she talk about?' demanded Flisher.

'Talk about?' Egg looked indignant. 'Didn't talk at all. Asked for a pint of milk. Nothing to talk about in a pint of milk.'

Jinny Randall intervened to ask: 'Is she good-looking?'

Egg shrugged his shoulders. 'All depends on what you call good-looking.' He listened no longer. Retiring into his private dream he lost touch with the conversation going on around him. But presently he emerged to hear Flisher say: 'Well, I had a peep at her.' Flisher gave him a sidelong spiteful glance. 'And she's awfully *fat*. That I *will* say.'

Egg stared at his sister in mild surprise, wondering of whom she could be speaking. But he

did not trouble to ask. . . .

All that day, indeed, he lived and moved in a dream. He was excited, even feverish, but infinitely content with his excitement and his fever. Next morning, however, waking into this transfigured world, his agitation became painful. In the company of brothers and sisters he found that to behave normally, as though to-day were no different from other days, was a difficult and exhausting task. Surely this inward tumult must find some witness in his face! Surely his blessedness and his hunger, his past glory and his present clamorous need, must be evident to everybody! Below all the surface activity of his mind, which was kept busy with this necessity of being natural, was the thought that this very day, this very morning, he might see her again. He was afraid to look at that thought lest (though he didn't indeed reason it out) it should thereby become visible for all to read, audible for all to hear. Had she not confessed that she 'might' come to the orchard again? And though no hour had been named, was it possible to choose any other hour than the one made memorable yesterday? Egg, at once a more simple and a more complicated being than the dull fellow he had supplanted, was divided against himself, yet scarcely conscious of the division. In one part of him he knew that before morning had reached her zenith he would see Monica Wrenn again; in another he was in terror of being disappointed. He knew, but he instinctively pretended to doubt; taking, quite unconsciously, a

pleasure in the consequent alternation of torment and bliss. And at other moments, when fear became too sharp to be endured, he pretended to a greater degree of certainty than he possessed. He was in a state of exquisite incessant commotion; hope never hardened into assurance, and fear stopped just short of crazy despair. Never before had he been so excruciatingly alive.

By the time he reached—after much contriving subterfuge—the orchard, he was well-nigh worn out with emotion, and incredibly, for one instant, a sick weariness assailed him, so that he felt scarcely able to endure the excitement of opening the gate and walking in and putting an end to his suspense. It seemed to him in that dreadful moment that he could almost have brought himself to turn back and seek rest in oblivion. But only for a moment. Having swallowed, half-chokingly, the excitement that rose in his throat, he forced himself to enter the orchard at a brisk pace. And there, standing under the same tree as before, was Monica.

This moment of realization gave him, necessarily, a shock. For nearly twenty-four hours past she had been a dream to him, a symbol, a religion. Now she was actual, crudely actual; and though her beauty suffered no diminution, and though he had hungered to be near her, it was yet perhaps disconcerting to find her existing, located, solid. He noticed that she was slightly freckled, that her mouth was large; and being emotionally exhausted he could not at once be sure that these accidental things, so far from being matter for regret, sup-

plied the last pure drop in his cup of romance. But the next instant he knew this with all his heart, so that he rejoiced not merely in the idea of her but in the glorious bodily fact, and for the first time he entertained—shyly, rapturously—the possibility of touching her. An agitation too profound for happiness troubled his spirit; but presently—in perhaps ten seconds from the moment of meeting —the healing comfort of her presence flowed into him, filling him with peace

She was the first to speak. 'It's lovely this morning, isn't it?'

He nodded. 'As lovely as yesterday. Have you been here long?'

She answered with another question: 'Why did you come?'

'To find you,' he said promptly.

'To find *me* indeed!' She pretended indignation. 'You didn't know I'd be here. I didn't know myself until this morning.'

'*When* did you know?' asked Egg eagerly.

It was suddenly immensely important that he should know precisely at what hour her decision had been reached; but once again she parried with a question. 'Do you come to the orchard every morning?'

'Yes,' said Egg. He knew by her smile that she didn't believe him; and he knew that she interpreted his 'Yes' as a promise. 'Have you been reading your book out here?' he added.

He had only just consciously noticed that curious portent, her book; and it explained something

about her that had vaguely intimidated him. With a book in her hand she had almost the air of being on her way to or from church; for he had never before seen any book carried into the open air except a Prayer Book or a Bible. He guessed now that Monica's was a piece of secular literature, but her association with it started all his old disorders again. She was evidently a clever one, a reader of books; and he was nothing at all. No sooner had the question fallen from his lips than a feeling of unworthiness invaded him Sheepishly he turned his eyes away from her.

'Yes,' she said. 'I thought it would be a nice place to read in, the orchard. Are you going to prosecute me, Mr Pandervil, for trespassing?'

At that, for a moment, he felt sheerly wretched. But seeing the mischief in her eyes he took courage to say: 'That's what they call Father, not me. I'm Egg, you know.'

'Mr Egg then. Would you like to look at my book?'

He received the book awkwardly, nervously, as though it had been an infant that he was afraid of dropping. 'It looks very . . . very nice, I'm sure,' he said politely, turning the pages. His cheeks were scarlet. 'But I'm not clever enough for books, and that's a fact.'

'I'm not at all clever.' She spoke quickly, all her schoolgirlish levity gone in a flash. 'But I love reading. So would you. That's by Shakespeare. Sonnets or something.'

'Shakespeare? Oh, yes! It's him the Vicar

sometimes talks of, isn't it? Your uncle, that is.'

'It's Uncle's book,' confessed the girl. 'I sort of stole it. Well, you know, took it. Of course I shall put it back. What I mean is that he doesn't know I've got it. He'd be cross if he did, I expect.'

Was it then a prohibited book? Egg was human enough to be stimulated by the suggestion into looking at the pages more attentively. 'It's printed funny, isn't it? A funny shape.'

'Is it? I don't think so.' Monica came to his side, puzzled. They studied the page together. After a pause she said, tentatively: 'It's poetry, you see.'

'Oh, poetry, of course!' That word, for Egg, was the summing up of all that was high and difficult and eccentric. 'Not in my line, poetry. Very nice, I 'm sure. But I can't understand it.'

He was about to close the book, but she placed a finger on the page and cried: 'There, that's a lovely one. Some of them are very hard, but anybody can understand that one.'

Wrinkling his brow, Egg read the sonnet through. It meant nothing to him. He read it again, silently forming the words with his lips, and he received a vaguely pleasant impression. A phrase in the fourth line, 'heavy Saturn', proved a stumbling block; for he read it as 'heavy Satan', and he felt that to mention Satan in the presence of a lady must surely amount to swearing.

'Do you like it?' asked Monica.

Being interested, Egg had forgotten his fear of

her superior intelligence. 'Lemme read it once again,' he said.

This time he discovered, with something like excitement, that he was reading an avowal of love. And, by some miracle (or was it her pointing finger?) four lines of the fourteen leapt up at him and presented themselves as a poem separate, complete, and curiously personal. Their meaning was not immediately clear, but he felt them to be beautiful.

Nor did I wonder at the lily's white,
Nor praise the deep vermilion in the rose;
They were but sweet, but figures of delight,
Drawn after you, you pattern of all those.

He liked these lines so much that he blushed in admitting the fact. 'But what does "drawn after you" mean?' he asked, with the image of a cart and horse in his mind.

Monica explained: 'Drawn like pictures, don't you see? The way we had to copy things at school.'

'I see. And the pattern means . . . ?'

'That's what you have to copy.'

Egg read the sonnet a fourth time, paying special attention to this chosen passage; and he began to see that there was 'something in' poetry, in spite of its superficial queerness. And a plan of incredible daring formed in his mind. 'I see what it means,' he said, looking at Monica. 'It means you.'

She turned from him with downcast eyes, and blushing. After a few minutes silence she said,

'I must go now.' And Egg was miserable all day thinking that his boldness had frightened her away from him for ever.

2

For seven more days Egg visited the orchard in search of her. She did not come. Nor did she come up to the house for milk. On Sunday he saw her distantly in church, but she seemed unaware of him. He made sure that he had irretrievably lost her.

Meanwhile the work of the farm went on, and Egg could not afford to be idle. Ten acres or so must be ploughed for root-planting—mangolds, turnips, swedes—or there would be no food for the cattle; there were sixty five sheep to be shorn; and, of the lambs, the 'singles' were now more than fat enough to be profitably sold, and many of the others were coming on smartly. Then before many weeks were past it would be time to be thinking about mowing and tedding and hauling the hay; Flisher would be busy with her cheese making, and three of the cows would be due to calve. Then, with the corn harvest and the fruit picking, another season would have come full circle. Altogether there was plenty of work to occupy Egg and Algernon, Higlett the shepherd, Dan Oaks the cowman, and Potty Oaks who was reputed to be Dan's son and to have been begotten shamefully, said the gossips, within the tables of consanguinity; plenty of work, this, leaving little

time, one might have supposed, for lovesick dreaming. Yet Egg, none the less, lived all that summer in a state of half-feverish, half-delightful melancholy, bearing on his twenty-year-old shoulders a burden of sorrow such as no one, he vowed, had ever borne before. With Algernon and Higlett—a small fellow, like a gipsy, with a squint eye and a mouth full of black teeth—he rounded up the ewes, penned them in hurdles, and sheared them in record time. Egg was a practised shearer—he had helped Willy in the old days. And Algernon, though he fussed and fumed a great deal, and talked incessantly, and sometimes drew blood, made a tolerable show. But compared with Higlett, with his fifty years' experience of sheep, the boys were the merest bunglers. With him it was as easy, he confessed, as shelling peas; and he was fond of boasting, with a leer, that the ewes, when he had finished with them, were as smooth and sleek as a girl's thigh, with never a scratch on them. At such remarks Algernon would giggle and look hot, and Egg would grunt.

Higlett, at sixty or so, was a crafty fellow with a taste for lascivious conversation; and Egg's impenetrable reserve piqued him. It had not escaped the notice, even of Algernon, that he was slightly intimidated by Egg, whose orders he obeyed with an alacrity unnatural in him. Dan Oaks was an utterly different type of man: heavily built, slow-minded, trustworthy, sanctimonious, a feudal serf. In his son Peter, nicknamed Potty for a reason sufficiently obvious, mental deficiency

was balanced by a kind of animal cunning; the poor lout, nearing thirty, was attached to his father by the bonds of servitude only; to Dan, not to the Pandervils, he was answerable; he had no official status in the hierarchy of farm labour, and received no pay, but an occasional thrashing from Dan served to keep him in a proper state of filial subordination, and he made himself useful in cleaning ditches and swilling out cowsheds. Of these three not one could write or read his own name.

During the third week in July the Pandervils and their two men set out with a scythe apiece to mow the rich green meadows of the higher valley. The day was warm and bright, true haymaking weather; and Egg, as he swung his scythe, felt the pride of young manhood flowing in every vein. At the end of each line he turned to look back with satisfaction upon the broad shining swaths; the smell of the grass was in his nostrils, and the brightness of summer for a moment filled his heart. The season, the ripe earth, his own strength of limb—all combined to reproach him for submitting so tamely, throughout these weeks, to the trivial tyranny of the fate that was separating him from Monica. He had lost count of the weeks that had passed since his last meeting with her in the orchard, but the glory of her now returned to him. There were a hundred reasons for despondency: his youth, his poverty, the difference in station—despite his father's gentility—between her and himself, she being so clearly a young lady,

so obviously the Vicar's niece. That he should ever win her, possess her, marry her, was a threefold miracle for which it would have been the merest folly to hope. Yet hope he did. More than that, he swore to himself passionately, stubbornly, that the impossible should be made to happen; and in that moment nothing seemed too great a task for his powers, if only, if only, she could be persuaded to love him. That thought brought him again to the verge of despair and made him tremble with a sense of his gross presumption. What was he that he should so dare? He was an unlettered boy, undistinguished, the working son of a farmer, with no personal gifts or attractions—how often he had peered hopelessly in the bedroom mirror!—and with no prospect of independence. He had nothing in the world that he could call his own except a few shillings of pocket-money which his mother, he suspected, could ill afford to spare him. He had nothing to offer Monica except his devotion. But with all his body responding to the sunlight it was impossible to be convinced by such reasoning. Hope became a flame in his heart, so that he was hardly surprised, when Flisher came into the field with jugs of hot tea, to see that she was accompanied by another girl. As the two came nearer, Egg observed calmly, holding his mad joy in check, that this other was Monica herself. The age of miracles was beginning.

Egg dropped his scythe and walked—with heart uplifted, with head downcast and face flushing—

towards the girls, who stood in the shelter of the hedge awaiting the haymakers. Not till he was standing at her side, too full of excitement to speak, too sharply aware of Flisher to want to speak, did Monica turn her large dark eyes towards him. For the briefest instant their glances met—his inquiring and (as he hoped) noncommittal, hers timid and veiled with shyness—and the very absence of words and incident gave to the meeting a warm sensation of intimacy. The merest faintest smile greeted him; yet he knew that their friendship, persisting through all these weeks of separation and silence, was now actively resumed. In some sense, he dared not wonder how, he and she were united, bound fast together in the enchantment of those orchard mornings. He saw her now, in his mind's eye, against a background of blossoming trees, herself the morning, the springtime, the intangible loveliness of life made tangible. But he was already bracing himself for the task of ordinary conversation, and reluctantly he heard Flisher remark brightly: 'This is Miss Wrenn, Egg. And she says I may call her Monica. We're going to be great friends.' A silly girlish speech, thought Egg; a babyish attempt to dispossess him of Monica, for Flisher knew well enough that they had met before. Having that glance to cherish, and being so deeply conscious of that bond, he could afford not to be jealous. Yet a small twinge bore witness to his resentment of Flisher's proprietary airs; her use of the sacred name offended him and made him a little sulky,

although it was possible—indeed it was more than possible—that a form of friendship between marvellous Monica and his very humdrum sister might work to his advantage. Had it not already led to this reunion?

'It's very hot,' said Monica.

Until now she had not spoken a word. Her presence, a grave brief glance, a faint smile on the lips—this had been all. But now he heard again, with the rapture of re-discovery, her voice, her deliciously 'different' speech. And now he was alive, awake, summoned out of the half-sleep in which he had existed for so long. This very day, the moment before her coming, he had exulted in his power to respond—with every drop of his young blood—to the joyous challenge of the sunlight; but that moment of exultation had been but a dim dream compared with the vital light of his present state. He was in heaven and he was lord of it, lord of everything except the adored one, the divinity whose voice—'It's very hot'—had translated him to this height, had invested him with kingship, had made of flesh and blood and bones and sinew a body of pure pulsating radiant energy, as of one raised from the dead. 'So this mortal shall put on immortality . . . ' But his thoughts were inarticulate, and he stammered a little in replying: 'Good haymaking weather. But we get very heavy dews, evenings, more's the pity.'

Flisher had brought with her a tray as well as a large basket. Egg, idly observing her pre-

parations, saw that to-day they were to use saucers as well as cups, that the doorsteps of buttered bread were no more than half an inch thick, and that Flisher, so profound her sense of this occasion, had positively provided a white cloth for the tray. He, his heart softening towards his sister, silently applauded these refinements.

'Of course,' said Flisher, as though reading his thoughts, 'we've had ours. . . .'

Yes, it was inevitable that the girls should have already taken tea, with Mrs Pandervil, in the stuffy little drawing room of Fipenny Hall; for that Monica Wrenn, a young lady of breeding, should picnic with rough men in a hayfield had been too great a condescension, and one which, if offered, could never have been permitted by Mrs Pandervil. Yet Egg, while he so reasoned with himself, experienced the smallest pang of disappointment. He blushed, however, with a sense of his unworthiness when Flisher continued:

'. . . though I b'lieve Monica would a liked to have it in the fields here.'

Egg looked—this time steadily and with purpose—at Monica. 'Would you really?' he asked.

She laughed, and answered with a pretty and unexpected emphasis: 'Indeed I would!' And another little heartbreaking melody was added to Egg's rich store. How did this girl so powerfully and easily enchant him? Was she more beautiful, more kind, more clever than others of her sex? Indeed she was. She had a smile of infinite candour and sweetness; she had a dimple, and long

dark lashes, and eyes that were at once bright and soft and thoughtful. Each one of these charms seemed, when she was silent, to be the secret of her, but when she spoke he felt that the magic was all in her voice, the enchantment summed up in the fact that the cadences of her speech were always deliciously unexpected. It may be that the whole of Egg's life turned on this pivot: that where another's voice would come to rest with an effect of finality on the last word, Monica's rose by an exquisite fraction of a tone and left her words delicately suspended in air, her speech beautifully unfinished as though it were a windborne phrase from the unending music of fairyland, and her hearer excited, expectant, and tantalized with a happy hunger for more. Egg never got used to these surprises; his memory cherished her cadences, learning them by heart and counting them over with a miser's passion; yet when they fell again upon his ears they were always new—new minted gold, fresh blossoming flowers, stars flashing in a blue sky, an ancient music never heard before.

He said again: 'Would you really!' And this time he could hardly keep pride and tenderness out of his voice. What wonder could ever exceed the wonder of her having been willing, indeed eager, to share, in a hayfield with the likes of himself, tea poured rudely from a jug into thick cups more than one of which shewed dirty brown cracks, instead of sipping delicately, in a ladylike fashion, from Mrs Pandervil's best china? It was impossible that there was another girl in the world with

so free and generous a spirit. And she so cultivated and accomplished, understanding poetry and all!

She nearly blushed, meeting his look. 'Yes, why not? How absurd you are!' Quickly she glanced away from him to stare at the bronze hair of Flisher who was kneeling in front of her basket. 'Can I be of any help?'

'Here come the others,' remarked Egg, to ease the tension, the very existence of which, nevertheless, gave him profound satisfaction and excited him with hope. Also he was uplifted by her calling him absurd, for her manner of saying the word—her bright glance, her wide smiling mouth, the quick downcasting of the eyes that had suggested an imminent blush—imparted to it a quality that was almost fondness, as of a mother for her beloved comical child. It made him feel at once like a little boy and like a god; proud, an accepted lover; humble, a willing slave. I am a giant, I am crude and strong, his heart said; and you, so small and frail, can with a word or a glance quell me. His mind, being inarticulate, said no such thing. Nor was she in fact either small or frail, as her sex went; she was generously made and lusty with a lustiness that gave peculiar piquancy, the right touch of intoxicated madness, to his sense of her being a lovely child, young and little, helpless and unprotected. She was a miracle and by a miracle sustained; because he loved and desired her he saw her beauty sharpened by the shadow of an unimaginable danger, a danger from which,

whatever it might be, he and he alone, by virtue of this new irresistible power descended upon him from heaven, could defend her.

The approaching Algernon, seeing a strange girl, paused a few yards from the group; then with a kind of obstinacy in his demeanour came boldly on. Not waiting for an introduction, being in fact a little too obviously terrified of so idle and genteel a ceremony, he nodded towards Monica, muttering: 'How de do, miss!' And to Flisher he hastened to say, in a voice unwontedly loud. 'Cup a tea's just about my ticket. Got plenty of sugar in? Eh, Flisher?' The three other men—for Potty Oaks was among them, though not safe to be entrusted with a scythe and therefore of no practical use—grouped themselves dubiously at a respectful distance. 'Come and get your tea, you men!' shouted Algernon in his grandest manner. Shewing off! thought Egg. But his mind was busy not with Algernon's awkwardness but with the question whether he could fitly offer Monica his jacket to sit on, or whether he would do better to wear it. The jacket was hanging on the gatepost ten yards away; and Egg, as he now realized with some embarrassment, was in his shirt sleeves. What a sight he must be for a lady, he all hot and sweaty and shewing his braces! But looking at her again he ceased to remember himself, being filled anew with sheer wonder and with a wish to serve. He ran and fetched the jacket and spread it at her feet.

'Won't you sit down on this?' From his kneel-

ing position he looked up at her; her lips were forming a polite refusal as she glanced down. He was aware of disappointment, a hunger unassuaged, and then, as she smiled acquiescence, of instant and heavenly relief. She had added wonder to wonder by consenting to make use of his jacket. His eyes shone gratefully upon her downsitting. For a while he thought his happiness complete.

The next time he glanced at her she was shewing unmistakable signs of distress. He turned quickly round to find Potty Oaks, with his mouth half open, staring at her hungrily and without disguise. Egg jumped to his feet, snatched up a huge piece of bread and butter, and accosted the half-wit brusquely. 'Here, put this in your mouth. And be off with you!' Potty received the food and the admonition without a word. He continued to stare at Monica, his expression unchanged. 'Be off, I tell you!' said Egg angrily, and seizing him by both arms swung him violently round. Reluctantly, with a sidelong glance, Potty shambled towards the gate; and Egg red with confusion, turned back in time to see a meaning leer pass from Higlett to Dan the cowman. 'What's tickling you, Higlett?' he demanded in a fierce undertone. It was a mistake. He felt that he was making an exhibition of himself, and when he rejoined his own party he was met with curious stares by Algernon and Flisher. Monica herself was bent low over the picnic basket, contriving to hide her face in a pretended search for something. Her attitude was

eloquent of shame. 'That lad's getting out of hand,' muttered Egg, in self-extenuation. 'He'll be breaking out one of these days. Not safe it isn't. Why don't they put him away?'

Algernon shrugged his shoulders. 'What makes you say that, all of a sudden? Wasn't doing any harm as I could see. Mighty touchy, aren't you?'

Flisher's smile was more pointed than Algernon's speech. Egg, to escape from it, turned covertly, sadly, towards Monica. Her back was towards him, but at that moment, as if in response to his silent appeal, she flashed at him, over her shoulder, one quick radiant glance. And at once he was a new man, a man enthroned above the stars, caring nothing for Higlett's leering innuendoes and Algernon's stupidity, and raised far beyond reach of Flisher's barbed smiles. Gratitude gushed in his heart, and he yearned with sudden passion to spend himself utterly for the author of this new life, that he might prove himself hers. His imagination became grandiose, his demands extravagant. He caught himself almost wishing that these men, these two labourers and his brother, were visibly menacing Monica instead of merely failing in due reverence to her, so that he might have fought them all and slaughtered them and thrown their silly carcases into the sea. He forgot that the sea was some hundreds of miles away—a man in love cannot think of everything. The next moment he felt a little ashamed of this braggart fancy, and he began saying to himself:

If only I could tell her. If only . . . if only . . . There seemed, alas, so little chance of that.

Labouring to create a diversion he said: 'So Sarah didn't come to-day?'

Flisher's stare was uncompromising. 'Whadjou mean Sarah didn't come?'

'Down here with the tea,' said Egg. 'She came yesterday, but not to-day,' he added lamely.

'No, indeed!' cried Flisher importantly. 'Because why? Because her Reverend Twigg came to see her, if you please!'

'What, the curate!' exclaimed Algernon. 'You never told us. Mighty secret all of a sudden!'

'Why?' asked Egg. His surprise was sincere enough. 'There's nothing very important in Mr Twigg, is there?' He flushed, remembering when it was too late that Mr Twigg was the Vicar's new curate, and that Monica was the Vicar's niece.

'Oh, isn't there!' said Flisher. 'That's all you know, my dear. Nothing very important, eh? Better tell our Sarah that, and see what happens.'

Egg, glancing at Monica, was ashamed of this conversation, ashamed of his brother and his sister. That they should expose their silly matchmaking fancies to the gaze of Miss Wrenn was a burden hardly to be borne. He himself had noticed nothing of what they hinted; but now, looking back, he had to admit that Mr Twigg's visits to the Ridge Farm had been surprisingly frequent and regular. A large fair man, this Mr Twigg, with prominent ears, and hands a size too big for him; good at games and popular with the village

lads; a little too hearty, a little too jolly, a little too solemn, every quality slightly in excess; a Muscular Christian born out of due time. Mr Twigg did not talk much about religion, but one gathered that he felt it the more for that. He sometimes, rather disconcertingly, interpolated a pregnant comment on wordly affairs when it was least expected. 'Faith without Works is Dead, Miss Minnow,' he remarked, when his organization of the village cricket was under discussion. 'Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord . . .' And indeed if anyone was disposed to say unto Mr Twigg 'Lord, Lord!', it was Miss Minnow, a gentle fast-fading spinster of thirty-five who obviously adored him. More than once she happened to be taking tea with Mrs Pandervil when the curate called. 'You make everything so *clear*, Mr Twigg,' she would say, with a sigh. 'And you have such *original* thoughts.' These compliments Mr Twigg would turn aside with a mildly reproving smile. 'Ah no, Miss Minnow! It's all in the Book, and he who Runs may Read.' Mr Twigg was 'broad' to the point of daring; he thought that even Dissenters might escape damnation if only they 'did good', if only they 'led good lives'; for, as he once declared from the pulpit itself, he did not presume to set limits to the mercy of God. One gathered that, within reason, Mr Twigg gave God a free hand, always provided that there was no weakening on the great Roman question, for it was an open secret that Mr Twigg was very angry with

the Pope. All things considered, the curate was a splendid fellow. He had a rich baritone voice and he sometimes sang hearty secular songs in the Pandervils' drawing room, to Sarah's stammering pianoforte accompaniment. Small wonder that Sarah loved him—the wonder (thought Egg, with brotherly blindness) was that he should have seen anything exciting in Sarah.

Monica remarked shyly: 'I think I ought to be going home if you'll excuse me. Auntie will wonder——'

'Oh, don't hurry!' cried Flisher. 'I'm coming too in a minute and Mr Twigg will take you back, won't he? They know you're safe with him.' Flisher turned to Egg, eagerly explanatory. 'You see, Egg, it was Mr Twigg brought Miss Wrenn to see us—brought Monica, I mean.'

Egg, with a superhuman effort, said as casually as he could: 'If Miss Wrenn really wants to go——' He turned in confusion to Monica: 'Let me see you home.'

'Thank you very much.' His heart leaped. 'But there's no need for anyone to come with me. It's only a few yards.' His heart sank again. 'And,' added Monica, 'Mr Twigg *will* be waiting for me at your house. I'd forgotten about Mr Twigg.'

She had forgotten about Mr Twigg: that was as it should be. But the more Egg thought of Mr Twigg, the less he liked the situation. The fellow had brought Monica to see them, had he! The two were living under the same roof, the Vicar's

roof . . . Egg hoped with all his heart that Mr Twigg would make haste to marry Sarah.

3

When at the first intimation of dusk Egg and Algernon came in from the fields, they found the kitchen, where supper was laid, all but deserted, Martha alone being in attendance there and waiting for them. She, as gawky now as Flisher had been two years before, looked more attractive than usual, being greatly uplifted by her sense of office, and flushed with the excitement of being in the midst of unusual events. For the visitors, it seemed, were not yet gone; they were at this very moment in the drawing room with the seniors of the family. Sarah had been playing, with great acceptation, *List to the Convent Bells* and Handel's *Harmonious Blacksmith;* Mr Twigg had sung *Bid me Discourse* and a song about a storm at sea of which Sarah had been for weeks secretly practising the accompaniment; and Miss Wrenn, too, in a sweet husky voice, ever so deep and strange, like a man's almost (said Martha), had sung such a nice song, you never did! And, to crown the wonder, sandwiches and cakes had been provided at a moment's notice as you might say, and Mr Pandervil (in person) had broached a bottle of port wine. There never had been such an evening before, and it could have but one meaning.

'You'd never guess,' declared Martha 'Never.'

Egg declined to guess; but he was conscious of

immense relief, and he longed to hear that Sarah and Mr Twigg were definitely and irrevocably betrothed. The man was clearly a fool, since, having seen Monica, he still desired Sarah; but so long as he remained free he might, by some mischance, lapse into sanity.

'We know all about it,' said Algernon. 'Don't we, Egg?'

Martha's face fell. 'Oh, well——' She tossed her head. 'If you know, you'll not need telling.'

'We don't really know, Martha,' said Egg. He shot out a hand as she was passing, caught her by the shoulder and spun her playfully round. 'Come along, out with it.'

She eyed him dubiously a moment; then decided to struggle a little; but he was too strong for her, she couldn't escape. 'I'll tell *you*, Eggie,' she said, 'but not *him*!' To Algernon she showed the tip of her tongue. 'I'll whisper,' said Martha, and, like the child she still was, put her arms round Egg's neck as he bent down towards her. 'Somebody's engaged to be married!'

'Who?' asked Egg.

'Aren't you surprised?'

'Yes, of course, I'm surprised. Somebody engaged! Well I never! But who is it, Martha?'

'Well, it's Mr Twigg for one. I *love* Mr Twigg, don't you?'

'You bet I do!' said Egg. 'Who's the other?'

'Well, it's not Flisher.'

'Fancy that now!' exclaimed Egg, with irony that passed, as he intended it should, for appre-

ciation of Martha's dramatic effects. 'Well?'

'Egg,' whispered Martha, still more mysteriously, 'suppose now it was Miss Wrenn?'

He stood rigid, held fast in an agony of fear. He heard his heart thumping, thumping, in a vast void. He heard himself exclaim in a loud unnatural tone: 'Suppose your grandmother! It's Sarah, of course. Of course it's Sarah. Don't talk nonsense, Martha!'

Algernon intervened, his mouth full of bread and cheese. 'Well, what if it is! Nothing to lose your wool about, is it?' He grinned cheerfully. 'We'll manage without the lass, I dessay.'

Martha said no more; Egg remained stretched upon the rack of his fear. It was absurd, this surmise, but not impossible. Everything pointed to Sarah; yet it might be . . . it might be . . . And he could not bring himself to question Martha any more; he could only pray that her tongue might be loosened without his further self-exposure. Already Flisher, and perhaps Algernon too, had divined his state. He sat down at the table and began his supper. He was in a fever. His nerves twitched. He frequently shifted his position on the chair, every movement being marked by the sound of hobnails scraping the brick floor. Seeking distraction from his anxious thoughts he allowed his glance, as he munched, to wander aimlessly about the room. It came to rest at the dresser, which was full of gleaming white crockery, Mother's pride; and he suddenly thought how richly satisfying it would be to shy something at

that stuff and hear it smash and see it fall. He became aware that Martha was eyeing him speculatively, and that all Algernon's attention was on the food. And then the latch was lifted and Sarah herself stood in the doorway.

'Aren't you coming in, boys?'

Sarah was radiant; her eyes sparkled and birds sang in her voice. In years verging upon thirty, she now looked twenty-five, all her ordinariness transfigured by a sudden unexpected blossoming of the spirit. Her joy, telling its own story, was communicated to Egg; and being released from his own fear he forgot his hope as well, and a brotherly affection filled him. Good old Sarah, he thought; and then he said his thought aloud and, shaken out of habitual shyness, got out of his chair and flung himself upon Sarah, boyishly, and gave her the kind of playful bear's hug he had sometimes given her as a child and never since.

'Why, Eggie!' said Sarah, blushing with pleasure. 'What's come over the boy!' Grinning, and already confused, he saluted her cheek with a loud half-comical kiss. 'Great silly!' she said fondly. 'But aren't you boys coming in? We've been having music and I don't know what all. Have you finished your suppers, both?'

Now that he was within an ace of seeing Monica again, Egg was frightened. He looked down at his clothes. 'I'm too dirty for company.'

'Oh, never mind. They'll not notice that. You coming, Algy?'

'Bed for me,' said Algernon. 'Give my love

to Ernest, old gal.' He winked at his sister.

'Get along with you!' said Sarah rosily.

The men went to their shared bedroom. Egg began diligently scrubbing himself and brushing his clothes, watched silently by his brother who had lost no time in undressing and getting into bed.

'What d'you want to go to bed for, Algy? It's early yet.'

'Nine o'clock nearly. Late enough for me. I'm tired. Come to that, what d'you want to doll yourself up for at this time o' night?'

Egg shrugged his shoulders. 'Something to do.'

His next operation made Algernon sit up in bed with staring eyes. 'Good sakes alive! You're never going to clean your teeth *now!*'

'Looks like it,' said Egg, wishing he dared be so eccentric as to shave the golden down from his cheeks and chin.

'What, at bedtime!'

'Why not?'

'Well I'm——' Algernon sank back on the pillow, apparently in despair of ever understanding his queer young brother. During the next few minutes he must have indulged in unwonted mental exercises, for when finally, the toilet completed, Egg lifted the latch of the bedroom door, a loud chuckle from the bed advertised Algernon's discovery of a new idea. It was an aggressive chuckle, not to be ignored.

'Well,' said Egg, pausing. 'Let's have it.'

'Hullo, Egg!' cried Algernon, shooting up in

bed again. 'Not gone yet? He grinned. 'Well, good luck, boy!'

'What do you mean?' Egg demanded.

'Perhaps I'm not so blind as you think,' remarked Algernon. 'And you're a gay young spark, you are, to be sure! Got a clean handkerchief?'

Egg, putting a bold face on it, came back into the room and opened a drawer. 'Thanks for reminding me. Have to be a bit particular with parsons about.'

'Better put some scent on it,' advised Algernon. And, intoxicated by his own wit, he burst into a roar of laughter.

Egg, though embarrassed and confused, was glad to find Algernon in a friendly mood again, for he knew that there was now no malice in his chaff. 'Well, look here, Algy,' he said. 'Don't go talking to anyone, will you?'

As if pleased and flattered by the appeal Algernon at once became sober. 'Not a word. Trust me, lad. . . Goo' night.'

'Night!' said Egg gratefully, from the passage. He closed the door, and made his way downstairs.

As he passed through the kitchen a new obstacle appeared in his thoughts. 'Martha!' His voice was sharp with nervousness. Martha, as he could hear, was washing the supper things. Hearing no answer from her, he ran to the scullery door. 'Martha, did anyone do the milking?'

'There now!' said Martha. 'I wonder if our

Sarah—no, she couldn't have! Reverend Twigg's been here for *hours*, he has. Ever since tea, *and* before.'

'Oh, all right.' Egg's voice was dull with despair. 'Just tell 'em in the drawing room that I've gone to do it, will you?'

Without another word he clumped into the yard where, in the dim light, he could see the cows—fabulous sculptured beasts with the moon rising behind them—grouped near the gate in the field beyond, mutely waiting to be admitted. He opened the gate, called intimately to the cows, and watched them lurch past him, one by one, into their shed. Only five in milk, thank God! But five was enough to prevent his seeing Monica again that night.

He lost himself in an unhappy dream, his head resting against a cow's flanks, his fingers mechanically working the teats, his mind drowsed by the rhythmic resonant sound of the milk spurting into the pail. 'Come up, Blossom! Come round, lass! Steady now!' He lost sense of time and place, thinking only of Monica and Sarah and the Reverend Twigg and a hundred other distant things. And he went on milking cow after cow . . . until his attention was caught by a ray of light moving across the wall of the shed, a faint glow that with every passing moment grew more golden. He heard steps on the cobbled yard, and a voice speaking. It was Martha's voice. The next moment Martha came to the door of the shed carrying a storm lantern.

'Hullo, Egg! You haven't finished yet, have you?'

Egg grunted. 'All but one.' He did not look up.

'He says he hasn't finished yet,' said Martha, over her shoulder. 'He's got one more to do.'

At that he turned quickly on his stool. In the darkness behind Martha something moved. His breath came fast; he stood up eagerly. Monica stepped delicately into the circle of light.

'Miss Wrenn,' explained Martha, 'hasn't ever seen a cow milked, Egg. Fancy! Isn't it funny!'

'So I've come to see you now,' said Monica. There was a ripple of laughter in her voice. 'I hope you don't mind being watched?' While he was stammering an answer she interrupted him to say: 'I mustn't stay long. Mr Twigg will be waiting to go. It's very late.'

'Mr Twigg can go,' said Egg. 'I mean,' he hastily added, 'Mr Twigg needn't wait. I can see you back to the Vicarage if you'll let me.' He hoped his face was in shadow, so that young Martha could not read its expression.

Monica made no reply, but presently she said: 'How soon will you be finished? Five minutes? Well, perhaps your sister wouldn't mind telling Mr Twigg.' She turned to Martha. 'Would you be awfully nice, Martha, and run and tell Mr Twigg that I'm watching a cow being milked and that afterwards your brother is kindly going to see me back to the Vicarage?'

'Yes, Miss Wrenn.'

'Perhaps Mr Twigg will catch up with us?

We'll go round by the road, shall we?' she asked him.

The way by road was four times as far as the way by the fields. 'Yes, by the road,' agreed Egg, eagerly.

'Please tell him, will you?' said Monica. 'Good-night, Martha!'

Martha hesitated. 'Shall I say good-night for you to Mother?'

'Oh, I spoke to Mrs Pandervil before I came out,' said Monica.

When his young sister was gone, Egg ventured to look at Monica. He was brimming with joy in the thought that perhaps—her having said good-bye to his mother made it probable—she had not only made this milking an excuse for seeing him, but had even counted on his taking her home. Of course it was no more than kindness in her, a sweet maidenly pity for a need he had been unable to hide; but none the less his heart sang, and he could have fallen at her feet in gratitude.

The last cow was now all but drained of her milk. Her udder was empty, but despite his eagerness to be gone, he remained to urge a few reluctant drops from each teat in turn, the teats being held at the top, where they joined the udder, with his left hand, and squeezed slowly downwards—so that they looked limp and elastic—between three fingers and the thumb of his right hand. Then he carried his pail of milk to the dairy, shouted to Martha in the house, and without waiting for an answer rejoined Monica Wrenn.

They stood facing each other in the dim light of a newly-risen moon, the farmyard smells—an earthy exhalation—rising about them. Egg's fever left him. He had found her again and he was content. For all the agonies of the day this moment, this surpassing peace, richly atoned.

'Are you ready?'

She answered: 'Yes.' Her voice was as cool and confident as his own.

'We'll go to the orchard,' said Egg; and they began walking side by side.

For a while there was silence between them, but as they reached the gate of the orchard, Monica abruptly stopped and said: 'Oh, dear! I've just remembered something.'

'What is it?' he asked.

'I told them we'd go by the road.'

'Never mind,' said Egg. After a pause he grew bolder and added: 'So much the better. He'll not overtake us now.'

The orchard received them in a silence made magical, and left unbroken, by the trickle of the brook and the occasional movement of a wakeful sheep. The young apples clustering above their heads were silvered by moonlight; and, except where the wooded hillside cast its strong shadow over the valley, the whole orchard was flecked with a delicate, a ghostly radiance. At intervals there were little cheepings and flutterings—a rabbit, a night bird, some warm secret life; the grass rustled softly underfoot, the ground seeming billowy like smoke, undulating like a green and

silver sea; and the moon, a bright extravagant wonder, breaking free of the net of trees in which it had seemed to be caught, floated slowly up the sky. In this unsubstantial world the boy and the girl move unconstrained, for a while, like disembodied spirits, being one with the beauty about them, and breathing with every breath an intoxication that made speech of no account. But presently, his mortal sense awakening, that sense of passing time which goads man from pure ecstasy to action, he stretched out an arm and seized her hand. They stood once more, he and she, on solid earth, her large eyes, grown larger with wonder, gravely regarding him. What could he say? He tried to say that he loved her; but the words, so insignificant compared with this invisible reality vibrating between them, failed of utterance. He could get no further than her name. 'Monica . . . Monica.' Her gaze faltered at sight of his worshipping eyes; and instinctively, without coquetry, she made as if to hide her eyes. 'Ah, no! Let me look at you!' His fingers reverently stroked her cheeks. 'Monica! Darling!' With a shudder of delight he let his hands fall gently on her shoulders, and murmured her name once more. And then he had reached her lips, and the world was annihilated in bliss.

When they released each other and stood apart, dazed and trembling, a hundred half-formed doubts and fears beat feebly in his brain. How had he so dared! What must she think of him! But to such things he paid no attention.

'Let's sit down.'

He took off his coat and spread it on the dewy grass for her to sit on. His arm encircled her shoulder, against which she confidingly nestled. With his free hand he fell again to stroking her soft, rose-petal cheeks, long shuddering sighs marking the rhythm of his adoration.

Presently she remarked, with a comical frown: 'What sticky fingers!'

'The milk's dried on them,' he said ruefully. 'I ought to have washed again.' His hand dropped despondently to his lap.

'*Darling* sticky fingers!' she cried, and snatched at them and pressed her lips against them.

She was laughing fondly at him; and laughing, but with laughter that quickly dissolved in compassionate tenderness, she suffered him again to enfold her, and met bravely, with sweet candour, the lips that craved her own. Without thought or intention he urged her gently backwards till she was lying full length on the ground. He flung himself down beside her, and, leaning on his elbow, crooked his left arm to make a pillow for his head. Bewildered with bliss, he gazed down upon her face, of which the essential character, the eternal sign, seemed luminously defined in this dim, strange, quietly breathing night. She was strong and proud and generous, and she loved him; nobly proportioned; innocent and ardent. She was womanhood, she was a woman, and she was Monica. Lying so still she might have been a sculptured goddess; but humanity shone in her great dark eyes and stirred in her bosom; her warm breath

fanned his cheek. All the heaped treasure of the world, more than all that life had ever promised him, lay in this little space; all heaven was caught, and crystallized, in this arrest of time. She smiled up at him, kindly, confidingly; and his lips grew hungry again.

With this third kiss, the longest and the deepest, a new pain quickened into life. 'Oh, I wish . . . ' He sighed and sighed again. 'I wish we could be married soon, quite soon.'

'Do you? Poor little boy!'

He stared at his dismal prospects. 'It will be years and years. And could you bear to marry a poor farmer? Of course you couldn't!'

'Of course not!' she said, tenderly ironical.

'But really!' He looked dolorously at her. 'It will be awful to wait so long.'

'Don't think about it,' said Monica. 'Think about Now. We've got Now, haven't we? And nothing can ever take this away, nothing ever, whatever happens.'

'Nothing,' he declared fervently.

After that they were silent—whether for a long or for a brief while they neither knew nor troubled to inquire, for they had found a world in which time had no meaning. The quietude enclosing them—moonlight and rich shadows, the smell of grass and the sound of running water, all blended in one brimming cup—was unbroken by any rumour of what they had left behind. Monica's hair became loosened and fell at a touch of Egg's delighted fingers. She sat up with a little cry. 'Oh,

my hair! How dreadful!' Blushing faintly, with startled eyes, she gazed at him; and the hair fell about her shoulders, a dark cascade, darker than night, and gave a new and exquisite definition to her face. Framing this revelation between his cupped hands Egg kissed her broad white brow, and kissed with small impetuous kisses that white middle path where the hair divided. And presently, with rising ardour, he gathered all her responsive loveliness into his arms, and again they fell back together into the grass, mouth yearning to mouth. His caresses became more eager and more fierce; imagination burst into flame; he stroked her breasts, and his hands and lips became eager, importunate.

'Hush!' she said, pushing him gently away.

Her tone forbade him, and he was filled suddenly with shame. 'Forgive me!'

'Dear boy, dear love.' She fondled his bowed head, and with her own hands guided it to her lap. 'Be my good child, and lie still.'

He lay still, quiet and still, under her stroking fingers. Peace slowly invaded his heart, and a delicious drowsiness filled his brain. And presently, in a half-dream, he became aware of a crooning voice, heavenly deep, heavenly soft, soft and deep as love itself, the voice of an immaculate mother.

4

He roused to hear her say: 'I wonder what the time is!' But, when he opened his eyes, the poise

of her head bending over him was so still, her gaze so untroubled, that he fancied he must have dreamed that she had spoken. They remained for a few moments looking at each other in silence.

'Egg, it must be very late.'

'Is it? Have I been asleep?'

'It must be ten o'clock. We must go.'

He stretched out his arms to her from where he lay. They kissed each other again, but as she drew away from him he saw that there was a shadow on her face.

'Listen!' she said.

'I can't hear anything.'

'No. Listen to me. We must go now. These are our last moments together.'

'Darling!' He was incredulous, protesting. 'Our last?' He sat up and put his arms protectively, possessively about her. 'How can you say that?'

With her face half turned away, so that he saw only her strong, perfect profile, she answered in a strange voice: 'Our last moments to-night, I mean. We've stayed here too long—people will miss us and look for us. We shall be in disgrace.'

He kissed her cheek. 'Come along, darling!' Even now he was shy of that word. 'I'll take you to the Vicarage at once.' Realization of his folly swept suddenly over him; the world, jealous of perfection, reached back into his mind. 'Will you get into trouble, Monica? What a selfish brute I've been! Let's go at once.'

He helped her to his feet, and they clung to

each other with tragic urgency. How could they walk out of this enchanted place and say farewell! Yet that was what they must do. She gave a little moaning cry. 'Oh, Egg!' Tears glistened in her eyes.

He tried to comfort her. 'There's to-morrow, Monica. Think of that.'

'Yes.' She was staring past him, perhaps at a long vista of to-morrows. 'But, Egg, even if there wasn't going to be any to-morrow, we've had to-night, haven't we, and we'll always have to-night. Nothing can take it away from us. And we'll always—love each other. We'll never feel any different, will we!'

'Never, never!' vowed he with all his heart. 'I'll get rich somehow. I'll work for you, so that we can be married soon.'

She said again: 'We'll have this always. We'll keep this safe, safe.' And he again, kissing her eyes and her hair, vowed that nothing should ever part them. So with joy and pain in their hearts, and fear crouching behind them, they strove with words and wishes against the unappeasable tides. 'We must really go now,' he said at last.

She stood rigid, terror in her eyes. 'There's somebody coming.'

Footsteps approached. A voice near at hand called her by name, sternly. 'Monica!' The lovers broke apart and turned round defensively.

'It's Uncle,' whispered the girl. 'And Mr Twigg's with him. They've seen us.'

The transition was too abrupt, the expulsion

from paradise too sudden. Dazed, like children reluctantly waking from a dream, they stood motionless, while the lean stooping figure of the Vicar sidled menacingly up to them. They were tongue-tied, in a silence that passed, no doubt, for shame, but was rather sheer stunned bewilderment.

'Well, madam!' said the Vicar. 'I never thought to be ashamed of my niece. As for you, sir——' He turned heavily to Egg. 'What have you to say for yourself? No, don't dare to answer me, you young ruffian. I saw enough with my own eyes—too much, too much! Your father shall hear of this!' He made a dart at Monica, grasped her by the arm, and commanded: 'Put your bonnet on, girl, this instant!' Monica stared back at him in terror and amazement, still dangling her sunbonnet by its strings. The delicious disarray of her hair made her look even younger than her years. 'Do you hear me, Monica!'

'Yes, Uncle.' She donned the hat.

'Then come home at once!'

Egg, striving to collect his scattered wits, stumbled in their wake, stammering: 'Wait, sir. I'm to blame, sir, not she. Let us explain. Won't you wait a minute, sir?'

A hand on his shoulder arrested him. '*I* shall deal with *you*,' said the Reverend Mr Twigg, in his best organ voice. He paused before adding, with tremendous emphasis: 'As—you—deserve!'

'Be damned! Let me go!'

Mr Twigg's grip tightened, and with sonorous

unction he answered: 'Profanity will not avail you, Egbert Pandervil. If there is one sin, boy, more loathsome in God's sight than any other, it is this sin of yours, the seduction of innocent girlhood.'

Egg jerked himself free. 'It's not true, Mr Twigg. Let me explain.'

'Don't add lies to your other sins, I implore you. You have lingered in this orchard an hour or more in the company of that young lady, your mother's guest. I trusted you; she trusted you. It is not too much to say that God trusted you. And you have betrayed your trust. . . No, don't deny it! I have seen more than you know. You lay in the grass together——' A hungry gleam shone in the curate's eyes, and suddenly he lost control of his smooth sentences. He began shouting, and brandishing the stick he carried. 'You dissolute young cur, you vile seducer . . . I shall thrash you for this night's work.' It was a performance in his best manner.

He advanced threateningly upon Egg. The boy did not move; a queer smile played about his lips; his heart sang. The imprisoned savage in him saw its chance of a holiday. With something like hope he felt Mr Twigg's fingers fumbling for a grip of his shoulder; the stick descended on his legs—a sharp cut. He twisted round quickly, and fury welled up in him, gloriously uncontrollable at last. 'Lying bastard!' There was a kind of happiness in his voice. He dealt a smashing blow at the curate's face, and shouted again—the same ugly

exultant cry. 'Lying bastard! Lying bastard! *Dirty* lying bastard!' Mr Twigg staggered back, letting the stick fall to the ground; and returning to the attack with a blind impetuous rush he ran into a second blow as damaging as the first. Egg was fighting madly, without pity or thought. He hit and hit again, careless of his guard and quite unmindful of the rough-and-ready science he had picked up in the fights of schoolboyhood. And this savage method, or lack of method, useless though it had been if matched against skill as well as strength, served him well enough now. Mr Twigg had fight in him; he had, moreover, the advantage of Egg both in weight and reach; but the suddenness of the assault had overwhelmed him, and by the time he was intelligently aware of what was happening, and had settled down to systematic fighting, his nose was copiously bleeding and one of his eyes closed. With this double handicap he was already beaten, though he fought gamely for a few minutes. Egg himself was severely bruised; his face burned; there was a curious singing sensation in his ears. Yet it was with disappointment, his anger being still unquenched, that he at last saw the curate beaten to his knees and seeking cover behind helplessly waving arms. Egg stared down at him, his clenched fists slowly relaxing. What was next to be done? He realized, dispassionately, that there was a mess to be cleared up; and he walked unsteadily away in search of the brook, whose voice was now the only sound in that disenchanted Eden.

It seemed a long journey to the brook, and the orchard trees swayed, lurching drunkenly towards him, as he walked. The way back was easier, for the touch of cold water had refreshed him.

He found Mr Twigg lying on his back full length in the grass, his face swollen and bloody, his eyes closed. With a handkerchief, which to this end he had dipped in the brook, Egg laved his enemy's features. Anger was spent; he no longer hated Mr Twigg. Nor, on the other hand, did he experience any compassionate revulsion of feeling. He regarded the man with a cool indifference tempered only by the realization that he was weak, in pain, and needing help. But when Mr Twigg, being roused by the cold wet pad of handkerchief held gently against his forehead, turned over, and then, with a sigh, slowly raised himself to a sitting posture, some small kindlier feeling—something between impersonal charity and positive friendliness—stirred in Egg.

'Feeling better?' he asked.

'Thanks,' mumbled Mr Twigg. 'I'm quite all right.' He rose unsteadily to his feet. 'Right as rain.' He passed a hand across his forehead. 'I'll go now.'

They faced each other as equals.

'Good night,' said Egg. 'And,' he added slowly, as an afterthought, 'what you said wasn't true, you know.'

'What I said?' Mr Twigg had almost forgotten what he had said, just as he had forgotten, it seemed, his cloth. 'Perhaps not . . .

I don't know . . . Good night.' He stooped to pick up his hat; then turned abruptly on his heel. For five seconds, Egg stood staring after him. . . .

He found the farmhouse in darkness. Everyone was in bed and asleep—Algernon aggressively so; his snores were like a trumpet. As Egg crept in between the cool sheets of his bed he recalled with disgust his momentary feeling of satisfaction at sight of Mr Twigg's bloody face. The events of the night repeated themselves over and over again in a series of sharp pictures—such beauty as had never before been poured into one hour of time, and a sequel unprecedented in its ugliness and folly. But already he was forgetting Mr Twigg, the Vicar, the threatened consequences, Algernon's snoring—everything but Monica. The fight had already become a well-nigh incredible tale, remote, irrelevant. But Monica—ah, Monica was with him in the darkness, her kisses on his mouth, the scent of her loosened hair in his nostrils, her soft breasts pillowing his head. Darling Monica. Lovely Monica. Three times, with a little conscious effort, he had called her darling; but now, in this secret place, he invented a hundred wild passionate endearments to whisper to her. They came leaping and tumbling from his busy brain. And then, crossing the yard, he saw her running towards him. But as quickly as his arms went out to her she evaded him and began walking away, looking back over her shoulder fearfully, imploringly, with hand outstretched beckoning

him on. He followed her down the lane, into the orchard; and there floating in the brook was Mr Twigg with wide staring eyes and a twisted smile on his lips. Monica was no longer to be seen; but in her place was a wizened old lady in a white cap who smiled at Egg toothlessly and pointed at the moon. And though he knew that this old lady was somehow Monica herself, he yet believed that by searching the orchard through, by shaking every tree and scanning every blade of grass, he would find the other and earlier Monica. He didn't do so, for he was now in Mercester Cattle Market; and there was Monica herself, young and beautiful again, tied to a post. The Vicar stood near, idly prodding her with the point of his umbrella; and when Egg attempted to reach her he found that he himself was tethered, and that a number of dirty-nosed children, with a dead goose swinging between them, were standing near him, pointing and laughing. He could see them laugh and shout, but he could hear nothing. He could see Monica's screams, and the auctioneer grinning, and the schoolmaster (for he was in school now) writing figures on a blackboard with a piece of chalk that suddenly, with the noise of a pistol-shot, broke into two pieces. One of the pieces of chalk became a white mouse and ran across the drawing room and up Sarah's back, but Sarah, seated at the piano, went on playing Mr Twigg's accompaniment, and nobody noticed the little sucking-pig nestling in her hair. And suddenly all the people in the world crowded round Egg, so that he saw a million

staring faces, one of which, the biggest and nearest, was Flisher's. Flisher carried a storm lantern which she held close to his eyes so that the light dazzled him. The lantern—or was it Flisher?—made a loud shouting noise . . . and sunlight was in the bedroom, and Algernon was shaking him by the shoulder. 'Wake up, Eggie. Mowing to-day, boy!'

Egg answered sleepily, rubbing his eyes: 'What's time?'

'Hullo!' said Algernon. He stared in surprise. 'Cut your cheek, have you! Pillow's all over blood.'

Egg, jumping out of bed, answered evasively; but by the time he had finished washing himself he had realized the wisdom of satisfying his brother's curiosity. Algy lacked finesse, but he was loyal. He could be relied upon not to betray a confidence, unless by a show of mystery he inadvertently betrayed it. But if he were left entirely in the dark he would sulk, his lonely heart would generate malice—after this very familiar pattern was Algernon made.

'Doesn't look so bad now, does it?' Egg presented his face for inspection.

'Only a scratch,' agreed Algernon.

'It was Twigg's signet ring that did it, I'll wager,' said Egg.

'Twigg's signet ring!' Algernon gasped.

'Met him last night in the orchard,' explained Egg, carefully (too carefully) getting into his breeches. 'He said things I didn't like, and there was a bit of a fight.'

'A fight! You fought the Reverend Twigg!' Algernon's eyes widened.

'Yes.' Egg strove to be quiet and matter-of-fact. 'He said things I didn't like at all. So there was nothing for it but to have it out.'

'Things? What things?' Algernon, after a moment's deep thought, was visited by an inspiration. 'Things about that girl?' He was excited.

'Yes. About Monica Wrenn.'

'Did you lick him?'

'Well, you see,' explained Egg, 'I was a bit mad with him. He made out I'd done things I hadn't. And he let fly at me with a stick.'

'And you licked him?' asked Algernon again, jealous for the honour of the Pandervils.

Egg began pulling his boots on. 'I suppose so. He had enough of it anyhow . . . Of course, mum's the word. Say I slipped up in the yard and got niched with the scythe.'

'You don't catch *me* telling!' declared Algernon, rubbing his hands together in jubilation. 'Ah, that's a good 'un, that is! Give him a black eye, Egg, didjer?'

Deceiving Nature had done her work well, for, in the hayfield, Egg's mind—despite a sharp intermittent anxiety—played happily with pictures of a radiant future. His desires projected images of their own satisfaction. He saw himself a rich man with a farm of his own; he saw Monica as mistress of his home, and he followed her from room to room playing with her, making love to her, teasing her and being teased. And he thought of the long

shared nights, nights of unimaginable beauty to which last night had been but the shy prelude. Darling Monica. Lovely Monica. Life this morning had no meaning but Monica.

When Algernon went in to his midday meal, Egg, blushing an excuse, hastened to the Vicarage. Throughout all his rapturous reverie there had persisted a faint undertone of fear, which now he could no longer pretend to ignore.

He knocked at the Vicarage door.

He told the maidservant boldly: 'I want to speak to Miss Wrenn, please.'

'Miss Wrenn is confined to her room, Mr. Pandervil.'

Egg's heart began galloping. 'Is she ill?'

'I'll inquire for you,' said the maid. 'Will you please to step inside?'

He was not kept waiting long. The maid returned in ten seconds with the news that Miss Wrenn was indisposed and could see no one.

Egg stood his ground. 'Did Miss Wrenn herself say so?'

'I didn't venture to disturb her, sir. It was the Vicar that sent the message.'

This interview changed the colour of his thoughts. The day was a torment and the night a fever. . . At noon the next day he presented himself again at the Vicarage.

'Miss Wrenn is not here,' said the maid. 'She has gone home, I'm to tell you.'

Holding despair at arm's length he replied: 'You're to tell me. I daresay you are. But is it *true?*'

The girl's eyes softened. 'Yes, indeed, Mr. Egg. It's true enough. Off she went this morning, as sure's sure. And my mistress with her. Ah, Mr. Egg, and she'd been crying, the poor young lady!'

He turned away without another word, knowing in his heart that this was the end.

5

First love had come late to Egg Pandervil, for his boyhood had been untroubled by amorous fancies and experiments. During all the dreaming years of adolescence, years lived in a spiritual solitude that was in effect cloistral, he had wooed beauty unawares, and love had gathered, drop by crystal drop, in his heart. Now at last, all being made ready, this vaguely apprehended dream had become alluring flesh, with eyes to enchant him, arms to enfold and lips to assuage, and—above all other wonders—a heart that answered his heart, a living and loving spirit. He had lived twenty years and Monica was the first woman he had ever seen. Upon this first love all the accumulated riches of his heart were squandered. Monica was the meaning and purpose and justification of his life; and he had lost Monica.

Five days after her going, a letter arrived for him, greatly to the excitement of his family. In her letter—queer mixture of primness and candour—she seemed far younger, in mind, than he had ever supposed her to be. This new and last

revelation tore his heart with tenderness. He had always, despite her dazzling youth and perhaps because of her gentle breeding, believed her to be far wiser and stronger than he; but now he saw her as a lovely, lonely, bewildered child, and himself as a man who had lived through centuries of pain. Monica wrote:

Your Monica is now far away. But why do I say your Monica when I can be yours no longer! For it seems I have been a very wicked girl, my dear Parents are very very angry and very sad, I have hurt them so. Perhaps it was wrong of me to do as I did and let you kiss me, and indeed I did more than let you for I wanted you to—but I fear I would act in the same way again, you were so sweet to me. So I must be very wicked indeed if what they say is true. And if that was a sin so is this letter one, for my Mother has forbade me to even think of you and I write these words against her command—to say good-bye to my good little child—do you remember the lullaby I sang to you? Dear boy dear Love, you must not write to me even, because I shall not be allowed to read your darling letters—so it is good-bye! I am full of wild rebellious thoughts. I would rather share poverty with you than wed the wealthiest man in England, but a whole long year must pass before I shall be twenty-one and if anything were to happen to his cousin Richard my Father would be a Peer if you please—so there is no hope for

us, dear Love, no hope at all. How I hate being a lady! I shall never forget the orchard and I pray that you may never be so wretched as your heart-broken Monica.

Underneath this was written in tiny caligraphy: 'Dearest, darlingest. How I love those sticky fingers!'

And now, for many days, the tangible world was less real to him than his love's phantom. A hundred times a day he caught himself fancying, for one mad moment, that she was here walking by his side, talking to him, laughing with him; and each several disillusion was a sword-thrust. The fields were populous with memories of her, associations sacred and terrible. Crossing the farmyard he imagined himself meeting her; in the hayfield he was tortured by mocking expectation; and the orchard he dared not enter. His heart was become a fountain of pain; whatever he thought of, whatever distraction he pursued, that thought betrayed him, that path led him back. He was haunted unendurably by the cadences of her speech, by chance phrases, by the funny little way she turned her head; in the midst of his work he would suddenly lose himself and stand at gaze, recalling this and that, the curve of her lips, the shape of her ear, until . . . surely she was here in the flesh, darling lovely Monica! Ah, no, she would never come again . . . By bitter experience he learned the folly of such indulgence; the pain of that inevitable return to reality was too great to be borne. Hating

himself for what seemed like infidelity, he began cultivating forgetfulness, trying deliberately to occupy himself with little trivial practical affairs, and sending Monica away; but the very effort defeated itself, and the moment his strained vigilance relaxed, she stole back into her kingdom. Sometimes, for very weariness, nature aiding, he forgot her for a while; and that was the worst experience of all, for after an interval the exiled memories would return, refreshed by oblivion, more radiant than before, to be greeted with a passionate and despairing ecstasy. Everything conspired to his undoing; the merest word, the most familiar sight, would recall her; his mind became infinitely cunning in self-betrayal. He learned to fear solitude but never to shun it. He feared every generous impulse, every stirring in him of kindness or pity; he tried to harden himself. In time he became afraid to think of any beautiful thing, for by that door, infallibly, Monica would enter him again. The sun shone with her light; birds sang with her laughing voice; summer's night, with leaves rustling and the sky moon-washed, was nothing but a reminiscence and false promise of her. Every night he went to bed worn out and eager to lay aside his burden of consciousness.

At last he told his father that he wanted to be sent away. 'I'm sick of farming.'

'Why?'

'I'm sick of it. I'm not happy here. Let me go away—to London, if you like, sir. I'll learn

some trade and earn money to send home and help Mother.'

Mr Pandervil winced at the innocent implication.

'How will your brother manage without you?'

'He'll manage.' Egg didn't know how and didn't care. 'You can get another man, or a boy perhaps. He'll manage. He'll be glad to. I've spoken to him about it.'

'I'll think it over,' said Mr Pandervil.

Within ten days of this conversation Mr Pandervil was taken dangerously ill. Egg drove with reckless speed to fetch the doctor, glad to have found something that he could do with enthusiasm. But Monica remained with him; he was still possessed. And when they told him, weeks later, that Mr Pandervil was dead, his first thought was half-envious. Lucky Father!—his troubles are over. Then, remembering that queer melancholy smile, those delicate trembling hands, he groped his way out of the house, and suddenly, with childish abandonment, burst into tears.

CHAPTER THE THIRD

NOOM'S

I

If one were to describe a circle round London with the Bank of England for its centre and with a radius of say five and three quarter miles, at a certain north-easterly point the circumference of that circle would bisect Farringay High Street. Egg Pandervil found the place by the more direct method of buying a ticket and travelling on the newly constructed railway to the terminal station of a little branch line from King's Cross. The urbanization of Farringay was only just beginning. Its shops were but five in number and insignificant in appearance; its High Street boasted (and the word is accurate) but one lamp; and its Police Force was contained in one cottage. Critics of Farringay sometimes called it a one-eyed street, because nearly the whole of one side was occupied by the red-brick wall that enclosed the estate of Squire Oaks. Signs of progress, however, were not wanting. Drainpipes had been thoughtfully deposited upon the roadside against the time when it should occur to somebody to use them; and in the fields enclosing Coppett's Lane several stacks of bricks

had been dumped—as an earnest of good intentions—by a speculative builder who called himself Blogg and Brother. Blogg himself occupied a raw red double-fronted villa at the corner of Coppett's Lane, a very commanding position. Brother occupied no house at all, for Brother was a trade fiction; but this fiction had so deeply engaged the curiosity of Farringavians, and was so faithfully insisted upon by Blogg himself, that a fanciful man could not spend five minutes in the builder's company without being haunted by the sense of a third presence. 'We can do that for you, mister, in a brace of shakes,' Blogg would say. He himself was a tall lean fellow with vigorous black hair and a face as red as his own bricks; and when he added half under his breath, 'I'll see what me brother says,' he conjured up irresistibly a second edition of himself. This duplication of his personality gave him the beginnings of fame. It got him talked about; it got him sought after. In Farringay the phrase 'Blogg's brother' became a proverbial symbol for the non-existent. Unquestionably, whether he knew it or not, Blogg owed a great deal to his brother.

Egg's 'opening', so kindly found for him by Sarah's Mr Twigg, was in Noom's the village grocery. With a bag in his hand and a bundle on his shoulder, and feeling—perhaps looking—not unlike Dick Whittington, Egg walked into the shop just before closing-time on a Saturday evening. Never having been so far from home before, he felt numb with loneliness, realizing for the first

time what comfort had flowed into him from the fields and vistas of his native Mershire. His aching sense of loss was dulled but not dead; in his heart there was a name he dared not utter. He was alive, he was twenty-two, and the future awaited his discovery. He was anxious and curious to see what would happen to him next. It seemed indeed impossible that anything out of the ordinary could happen to him in this prosaic interior. The shop was dark and small, lit inadequately by lamplight, and smelling powerfully of cheese and watering-cans and oil. The room was so small, and so well stocked with goods, that Egg had the sensation of being jostled as by a crowd. There were two counters, one comparatively empty where the business of the post office had once been transacted, the other laden with biscuit-tins.

He stood, nervous, hesitating, savouring the quality of his new surroundings.

'Yes?'

The voice made him start guiltily. With a shock he became aware of a presence in the shop. Behind the grocery counter, more than half concealed by the ramparts of tins, sat a girl a few years younger than himself. She, like the shop, was dark and small; she had sharp eyes, plump cheeks, and a slightly tip-tilted nose. Egg, blushing in the knowledge that she had been watching him, was quick to read malice, or at least suspicion, in her air of alertness.

He said: 'Oh, I didn't see anyone there.'

She slipped down from her stool and came to the

counter, across which she silently confronted him. He felt very foolish, and he hated her for not helping him out with his explanation.

'I'm E. Pandervil,' he said presently. 'Come to help in the shop. Is Mrs Noom at home? She'll know all about me, I expect.'

'Name of Pandervil, did you say?' The girl's tone was brisk, but not unfriendly. 'I'll tell them.' She went to the back of the shop, opened a door, and bawled: 'Pa! Ma!' After waiting a second or two she said, answering a voice inaudible to Egg: 'Yes, it's him all right.' Then she returned to the young man. 'I'm their daughter, you know. Carrie Noom.' This time her tone was definitely and encouragingly that of a friend. He ventured on a shy smile, because it seemed absurd to be afraid of such a youngster; but he was too busy with expectation of her parents to think of anything to say to her. The briskness of her movements was not unpleasing; her youth was attractive; her nose offered a hint of agreeable impudence.

'Well,' said the girl, 'Pa don't seem to be coming. And it's time to shut up the shop.' She vanished behind the biscuit-tins, to reappear the next instant behind the empty counter, the flap of which she lifted. 'Holiday to-morrow, thank goodness!' she remarked, joining Egg in the outer part of the shop.

'Can I help?' asked Egg politely. 'With shutting up the shop, I mean.' He was nervously eager to be of use. 'How do you do it?'

'Like this,' said Miss Noom. She danced to the door; slammed it; bolted it. 'You just shut it, see?' She grinned at the young man, her head cocked pertly on one side, so that one of her two pigtails was shaken out of place and fell across her bosom. 'It's quite easy when you know how.'

Egg laughed. He liked this child. 'What about the shutters?'

'Yes,' admitted the girl. 'There's them too. And this top bolt here—'stoo high up for me.'

'Lemme try,' said Egg. With magnificent ease —his arm stretching over her head—he shot the top bolt.

'My!' said the girl. 'You *are* a lank and no mistake!' Her frank admiration warmed him.

There was a pause, and he was beginning to feel self-conscious when she remarked: 'Well, we'd better be getting in. Perhaps you'd like a bite of something. But I may as well tell you—you've got to know sooner or later—Mother's not speaking to-day.'

'Not speaking?'

The girl nodded. 'There's days when she don't speak. You'd as well know now as later.'

'Is she . . . ill?'

'Well, you might say so.' Her manner was judicial rather than mysterious. 'Headaches and that. When she gets one of her headaches she don't speak. And she's got one of her headaches to-day . . . Let's come and talk to Pa.'

Pa was discovered to be sitting quietly by himself in the kitchen, an unregarded book on his knees.

He was a small, plump, chubby man of sixty or more, with bluer eyes and redder cheeks and less hair than most men of his age. Eyebrows raised, and head held at an angle that enabled him to peer over the lenses of his reading spectacles, he was gazing at the patch of dove-grey sky framed by the inadequate window.

'Well, Pa! Here's Mr Pandervil come.'

Startled out of a reverie, Mr Noom turned blinking eyes upon his daughter. 'What's the matter, my dear?'

'This is the new man come to help in the shop. Name of Pandervil.'

The old gentleman—for indeed he seemed old rather than elderly—rose to his feet. Until then he might have passed for an eccentric scholar, a gentle dreaming academic person like Egg's own father. But his movements, his manner, his half-deferential clasping of hands—these things suggested his trade. 'Ah!' said Mr Noom. 'Good evening, young man. I remember perfectly. Name of Pennyman—no, Pandervil. *I* remember.' Vaguely benevolent he stared at Egg. 'Let me see. Ah yes! It was Mr Twigg told us about you. Gave you a good character, Mr Twigg did. And there's nothing like a good character, my boy. And so you want to be a grocer, do you?'

What madness was this! Put into plain words the suggestion sounded fantastic. Yet Egg had to admit that no one could be blamed for supposing he wanted to be a grocer. He had himself—once

the suggestion was put to him—said as much. But now the idea was absurd, even terrifying; and he was in half a mind to snatch up his bundle and run out of the house to seek his fortune elsewhere. Mr Noom was a charming and kindly old gentleman, but a moment ago he had been staring at the already dark sky with a wistfulness that made the boy quite suddenly, irrelevantly, wish to be anything but a grocer. What, then, had he wanted? What folly had set him on the road of which Noom's Stores was the logical conclusion? He had wanted a change of occupation; he had wanted to get away from the farm with its cruel mocking memories of a loveliness he would never know again; and with both his parents dead (for Mrs Pandervil had not for long survived her husband), and Sarah married, and Algernon very ready to shoulder undivided responsibility, there had remained no reason why he shouldn't follow his whim.

'Yes, sir,' answered Egg.

'Very nice, very nice.' Mr Noom rubbed his hands together still more emphatically. Between his fragments of articulate speech he made little mooing noises. 'Yes, I remember Mr Twigg telling Mrs Noom as how . . mmmm . . well, that's all comfortably settled. Perseverance and industry, my boy. Mmmm. Top of the ladder. Very nice!'

'Oh, Pa!' exclaimed the girl. 'I don't believe you remember a word about it. Now who is *Mrs* Twigg, frinstance?'

Mr Noom seized his daughter by a pigtail and drew her within reach of his arm. 'Never you mind, Miss Impudence!' he said, with his arm round her slim waist. 'You get the young man a bit of supper. Mmmm. He'll be peckish, I'll be bound.' But as soon as her back was turned, he began making conspiratorial grimaces at Egg, which Egg, after a moment's confusion, interpreted as a question.

'My sister,' mouthed Egg.

Carrie began laying the cloth.

'Of course,' said Mr Noom, in a loud voice, 'we all know that Reverend Mrs Twigg, mmmm, is the young man's sister. We know that as well as we know Mr Twigg himself, that was curate here all one blessed winter. And a hard winter too, it was.'

He smiled mischievous triumph at his daughter. She looked from one to the other, and detecting the beginnings of a grin on Egg's face she fixed him with a gaze of mock sternness. 'You've been telling, Mr Sneaky Pandervil!' The two men looked comically rueful, like little boys caught stealing apples. 'Precious pair of babies!' cried Carrie. And all three burst out laughing.

Mr Noom was the first to recover his gravity. 'Sh! Sh! Poor Mother's headache—I quite forgot it!'

Laughter was now a thousand miles away. Father and daughter exchanged an anxious glance. 'Lumme!' said the girl.' 'Is it a bad one, Pa?'

'About as usual,' said Mr Noom.

'I wonder what started it?'

'It come on at breakfast,' said Mr Noom. 'You were sweeping the shop out or something and . . . well. . . .'

Mr Noom turned away with a shrug, and Carrie invited Egg to sit down to supper. 'You must be ready for it, aren't you? Travelling *makes* a person hungry, *I* always say.'

But Egg was not deceived by this outward cheerfulness, admirably sustained though it was, as well by Mr Noom as by Carrie. The young man suspected that this quiet gaiety must be short-lived. He pictured Mrs Noom as a thin-lipped, angular, sharp-tongued woman who might at any moment appear in the doorway and destroy with one cold glance the ease and geniality of this suppertime. Meanwhile, his shyness rapidly evaporating, he tried to satisfy Carrie's curiosity about the life of a farmer. 'And then,' said he, 'there's a market every week. That's a bit of a change. Ever been to a market town, Miss Noom?' But as an undercurrent to these memories ran a dark and bitter tide. They're nice people, but I don't belong here. She's a pleasant child, but she means nothing to me, nothing. And he was suddenly filled with wonder and passionate protest that he who had once been made free of the kingdom of heaven should be sitting here dethroned and outcast, a grocer among grocers.

But now there was someone coming. The two Nooms visibly listened and waited. Light steps descended the stairs; the door opened; and there

entered a smallish, bright-eyed, and rather buxom woman of perhaps fifty.

'Well I never!' said she, in great good humour. 'Quite a party, I declare!' For one startled moment Egg wondered who this visitor could be. 'And this, no doubt,' went on Mrs Noom, advancing with smiles upon the supper-table, 'this is Egg Pandervil. And welcome, I'm sure, young man!'

Egg rose, blushing, to shake the hand which Mrs Noom extended to him across the table.

'The Reverend Twigg's brother-be-law, isn't it?' said Mrs Noom.

'Yes,' admitted Egg confusedly.

'I thought as much,' declared Mrs Noom. 'Well, and now we'll have a bit of supper together.'

She sat down at the table, and at once was in command. It was as if even the plates and cutlery obeyed her. The meal, so far from being half finished, was only just about to begin; and it was to be a meal at which only two persons, Egg and Mrs Noom, would be present. Of the others she took no notice at all, and by her seeming unawareness she contrived to annihilate them. And when Mr Noom ventured in tones of conciliation to inquire about her poor head, she turned blandly to Egg saying: 'Another bite of cheese, Mr Pandervil? Do! Just a morsel! . . . And now we've got to know each other I shall call you Egg. Just plain Egg. It's so much more homely and comfortable to my way of thinking.'

2

Egg was employed as man-of-all-work at Noom's Stores for four years, during which time he learned the names and natures of a hundred and one articles of grocery, acquired the science of weighing and the arts of sweeping and dusting, kept wicket and made an aggregate of ninety-three runs for the local cricket club (his average was two point four), grew a moustache three times and shaved it off twice, made friends with Carrie, made friends with Mr Noom, provided Mrs Noom with a cause of war, on one occasion got drunk, on many occasions thought wistfully of Mershire fields, and was not, all things considered, unhappy. There was unhappiness in him, hidden somewhere, and ready, when the hour should strike, to rise up and overwhelm him. In dreams, both by night and by day, he was haunted sometimes by sweet stinging memories of a lost Eden. But there was so much to be done in this new life that he had no time, it seemed, for the indulgence of idle regret, even had not the urgent youth in him forbidden it. Farringay offered, after all, a wider variety of interest than ever Saffron Ridge had done, and despite the determined endeavours of Blogg and Brother there remained, even at the end of the four years, a few trees, a few blades of grass, a few unviolated hedgerows, to bear witness to its unregenerate rural past and to comfort Egg's heart. In fact, for all that local patriotism might protest to the contrary, Farringay was rural still. The

population, none the less, grew rapidly; for Blogg's villas, which were the colour of raw beef, struck a note of gaiety not to be resisted by emigrants from the crowded metropolis; and the train seldom took longer than half an hour to travel the six miles. A new grocer—alarming portent—set up business in the High Street, and the post office, of which the parent-shop, Noom's, had been as it were delivered the very day before Egg's arrival, now employed a dark young lady wearing pigtails as well as the elderly yellow-haired Miss Linney who was the post-mistress. In later years it was to become possible by favour of Miss Linney to send messages speeding through wires across England, but these days were not yet. Meanwhile, by diligence and perseverance, virtues recommended, sometimes with a touch of asperity, by the amiable Mr. Noom, Egg Pandervil made himself proficient in his new duties. He could say, 'Was there anything else, madam?' or, 'And the next article, please, madam?' and, 'Allow me to send it for you!' with an intonation copied—not quite unconsciously, not quite without malice—from that of the Reverend Ernest Twigg, whose reading of the lessons had been the admiration of Miss Minnow, Mrs Pandervil, Sarah, and some others. He learned how to accommodate a pencil behind his ear, how to manage a queue of impatient customers, how to open biscuit-tins without cutting his fingers, and the price of everything in the shop from beeswax and feather dusters to Noom's Own Guaranteed Bottled Plums. He learned that if

you put the cheeses near the oil-drum, someone is certain to complain; and he learned how to make the tin of golden syrup lie down with the enamel pudding-basin. For he was an expert packer. With a deliberate care cunningly concealed under a display of briskness—smart marshalling of the purchases, smart spreading out of the paper, smart folding, smart snapping of the string—he would compose the most incongruous shapes and sizes into a golden brown-paper harmony. A dozen of matches, a bundle of firewood, a bottle of sauce, a pot of Gentleman's Relish, a roll of sandpaper, two camelhair brushes and a small tin of black enamel—such an assortment presented no insuperable difficulty to the young man at Noom's; and you could always be sure that your brown paper parcel would be provided with a little loop of string by which, at your peril, you could carry it home. Moreover at the other counter, formerly dedicated to postal affairs but now used for the sale of dairy produce, young Mr Pandervil, with sleek hair and a shining forehead, would pat and slap and weigh you up a pound of best butter at one and a penny, or half a pound of lard at fivepence, as dexterously as you could wish. Indeed, whatever he was in the privacy of his own thoughts, outwardly he became, before those four years were past, very much the smart young grocer.

During this time Egg opened his heart to no one, perhaps not even to himself. Among the local tradesmen he made acquaintances but no intimate friends. Chief among his companions

were Mr Farthing the cobbler, Mr Wimmett the ironmonger, and Mr Pummice the proprietor of that little stationery and fancy goods shop which was one of the more recent glories of Farringay. Farthing was a short, hirsute, gnomish-looking fellow who was much given to winking and nudging; it was notorious that Mr Farthing enjoyed his joke. Wimmett was sandy, through and through; his very words seemed coloured by his person—a pale drooping lily of a man always audibly wishing that he could lay his hand on a fifty-pound note. The third of the trio, Mr Pummice, was considered to be a cut above his neighbours. He possessed abnormally sloping shoulders, and always walked slightly aslant as though he were trying to squeeze himself through a narrow passage; his face, faintly suggestive of a friendly bull-dog, was excessively mobile, like indiarubber; when he spoke there was such commotion among his features that it was almost impossible to listen and look at the same time, for which reason Egg got into the habit of fixing his gaze on Mr Pummice's white stock—crowning emblem of gentility—whenever that gentleman engaged him in conversation. Speech was indeed a complicated performance for Mr Pummice. It began with a sucking-in of the cheeks, a contraction of the eyebrows, a pursing of the large mouth into a small round tunnel through which one expected a plum-stone to emerge; from these contortions words resulted, and, having spoken, Mr Pummice —if, as was his wont, he had spoken at all weightily

—would smack his lips and allow his lower jaw to drop and remain open for a moment in a very knowing manner. Small wonder that Mr Pummice was universally respected. Moreover at Mr Pummice's shop you could buy not only note-paper, sticky labels, ladies' handbags, d'oilies, anti-macassars, God is love, and macramé thread, but —if you were, in local phrase, fond of a bit of a read—the complete works of William Shakespeare in one large wretchedly printed red-bound volume, Every Man His Own Doctor, Ministering Children, The Scottish Chiefs, and the Bible. Egg could not afford to buy any of these books; but, as Mr Noom reminded him, there were several books in the house already.

With these three men, the youngest of whom was at least nine years his senior, Egg struck up something of a friendship; and the four fell into the habit of meeting once or twice a week in the bar parlour of The Green Man. Mr Pummice was fond of what he called a quiet pint of an evening; Mr Farthing frankly liked beer and good fellowship; and Mr Wimmett welcomed anything that would help him to forget his slow drift towards insolvency. Egg was drawn into their company perhaps chiefly by his loneliness, although, indeed, no matter how lively the talk or with how eager a heart he contributed to it, his loneliness persisted, so that sometimes in the very moment of throwing back his head to laugh at one of Farthing's drolleries, he—remembering what he had tried to forget—would suddenly find the

taste gone out of life, and the inn and the men and the laughter and Farringay itself would seem unreal, empty, a bitter dream from which there could be no awaking.

The attitude of these men to Egg was subtly different from their attitude to each other. Although he was their junior both in years and in status there was, in the beginning of the friendship at any rate, a hint of half-amused deference accorded to him. Once Mr Farthing, with a twinkle in his bright black eye, referred to him in his hearing as 'the young gent here'. And one day Mr Wimmett drew the eyes of all four upon him by asking of Egg: 'Now what might you have come to be a grocer for, Mr Pandervil? No doubt you had your reasons.' Egg was still too shy to be more flattered than embarrassed by these attentions, but he was nevertheless touched by them, and his heart warmed towards his companions; yes, even towards Mr Pummice himself, who, rather comically, tried by the most delicate shrugs and hints, and by turning over his very small stock of literary allusions, to establish a kind of secret understanding with Egg, an alliance as of one cut-above-his-neighbours to another. 'All the world's a stage—eh, Mr Pandervil?' he would say, accompanying the remark with a facial disturbance that was in effect a wink. And with a turn of his head he would make it clear that this fragment of English literature was for Egg's ear only, not for these others—good honest fellows enough, but they lacked, after all, through no fault of their

own, the cultural advantages shared by himself and Mr Pandervil. Egg, as near blushing as a young man of his years could well be, would as often as not turn the edge of the compliment—unwelcome and, to tell the truth, undeserved—by saying with a grin: 'Ah, Mr Pummice, we're not all such great readers as you, y'know.' Yet he liked Mr Pummice; and he liked worried, straw-coloured, hesitating Mr Wimmett; but nearest of all to his heart was little Farthing, black-browed, confiding, gay, and agreeably vulgar. Good friends though they all were and good fellows—for Pummice's snobbery was not radical in him—they never addressed each other familiarly, but were always Mr Farthing, Mr Wimmett, Mr Pummice, Mr Pandervil, wearing the courtesy title perhaps consciously, but not proudly, as the badge of their class, a badge that distinguished them alike from the lower orders as from 'the quality'.

Egg had been only nine months among them, yet was already very much at home to all outward seeming, when a movement known as Teetotalism began to reach Farringay, finding a spiritual home in the Ebenezer Chapel which devoted a week-night service to its propagation. Rumours reached the four friends of alluring entertainments, including a novelty known as the Magic Lantern, which, so it was incredibly reported by eyewitnesses, could project coloured pictures upon a white sheet.

'Very gratifying, they tell me, to the young people,' said Mr Pummice. With a plump fore-finger he whisked away the superfluous froth on

his beer. 'And young Hartick has paid his tanner and signed the blessed pledge, would you believe it!'

Mr Farthing shook his head shrewdly; then took a deep draught of ale, as if to make sure of it before the madness spread. 'That's a thing,' said he, 'as I wouldn't do! No, Mr Pummice, you don't catch me at that caper. Not if you was to go down on yer benders and arst me, Mr Pandervil, I wouldn't. Believe *me,* Mr Wimmett.'

'Best keep away,' remarked Mr Wimmett. And his friends exchanged meaning glances, remembering that Mr Wimmett was a chapel-goer. 'If only I could lay my hands on a fifty-pound note . . . I wish I could.'

His voice was edged with plaintiveness. Mr Wimmett spent much of his life in wishing. . . .

These friendships and activities formed for Egg Pandervil the kaleidoscopic background of a more private drama, which in its turn was at first shadowy and insignificant compared with the adventures and agonies of his own lonely spirit. Entering the Noom household he had felt at first like an incredulous civilian who strays by accident into the firing zone; for he became gradually aware of a mysterious battle raging around him, a battle of which there was no visible or comprehensible objective. Who was the aggressor, and who the attacked? That was no easy matter for Egg to determine. All he knew in those early days was that to himself Mrs Noom was consistently gracious, though she had, it was clear, a grievance

against her husband and her daughter. He supposed that it was her womanly compassion for a boy exiled from home that prompted her conspicuous kindness towards himself; or perhaps her conception of politeness forbade her to utter the criticisms which he must, he thought, sometimes provoke in her mind. Not seldom her public benevolence to him was displayed in such pointed contrast to her treatment of these others, the old man and the young girl, as to make Egg profoundly uncomfortable and vaguely uneasy, till sometimes he half-doubted whether she were not deliberately working to alienate him from all affection but her own. She praised his manners, his industry, his honesty, his skill in salesmanship, she held him up as an example even to her husband. And she would openly claim possession of him by saying, with the air of brisk geniality so characteristic of her: 'Egg's *my* boy! We understand one another, don't you make no mistake!' Often her asperities to husband and daughter were sheathed in a smile by which Egg could not help being a little charmed, and the idea that Carrie and the old man were allied against her did for a while invest her with a certain pathos. And then one day she confided to him terrible things. 'Whatever you do, Egg, don't get into mischief of that sort. Thou God seest me. Remember that. Many a promising lad's come to grief through gallivanting after girls. And not only lads, let me tell you. Not by any manner of means. Men too. Oh yes, indeed. I *know*. I name no

names, but I've had something to put up with in my day. Not that I'm breathing a word about anyone, that's not my way nor never was. I can suffer in silence, because I've learnt my lesson, and in a hard school, as the Lord well knows. White hair don't make a saint, young man; and a hypocrite's a hypocrite all the world over.' With every word she said he liked her less, though he began to feel sure at last that she was a deeply wronged woman. 'I'll tell you something, Egg Pandervil,' resumed Mrs Noom after a pregnant pause. 'I'll tell you something. When my Carrie was a tiny thing, her ma's own chick, we had a girl here, general servant she called herself, though general nuisance and general disgrace to my way of thinking. And that girl—well, I'll say no more. I'm old enough to be your mother, that I am. But I'll say no more. Them as the cap fits must wear it, and I wouldn't have some people's consciences, not for a mint of money I wouldn't. Not that he's got a conscience either if it's a conscience we're talking about. More sinned against than sinning I daresay she was, the sly cat—but that's as may be.' Mrs Noom's speech, the facile flow of her vulgarities, was without precedent in Egg's experience of her. She was excited, and the floodgates of an unsuspected garrulity were opened upon him. He guessed that in a moment, with the least encouragement, she would make a scene. She lusted after a scene. He left her abruptly, to join Mr Noom in the shop.

He was horrified by what he had heard, because

it threatened to destroy the image of Mr Noom—good, kindly, wistful, genial Mr Noom—that he had set up in his heart. He had respected and liked Mr Noom. Sometimes the old man was irritable and tiresome, tut-tutting about the shop in Egg's wake like a censorious hen after a young chicken. But even then it had been impossible to take his displeasure deeply to heart, for the rosy benevolence of his appearance could not be extinguished by a frown. Nature had cast him for a 'sympathetic' part, and he contended against Nature in vain. Surely it could not be true that this seemingly gentle creature was a man of loose life? Egg was still in the golden confusion of adolescent idealism, and the mere doubt sufficed to hurt him deeply; more deeply, perhaps than he knew. He was not overwhelmed; he maintained a kind of detachment, resolutely reminding himself from time to time: It's no affair of mine anyhow. But the unhappy thought recurred too often to be ever quite out of mind during the whole of that day; it nagged at him like a nagging tooth; and the very frequency of his protests—What's it got to do with me? No business of mine!—betrayed him into the hands of anxiety, the enemy.

Did this day-long anxiety, half-smothered as it was, contribute its iota of cause to the evening's indiscretion? Perhaps it did. He now hated Mrs Noom and doubted Mr. Noom, and it was perhaps his sense of being homeless again, of finding ugliness where he had fancied simple honest worth,

that drove him back in his thoughts to the hills and fields, the hedgerows and little lanes of Mershire, and so set aching again the old wound till it seemed that anything, any distraction, any inducement of oblivion, must be better than this throbbing misery of the mind. Not quite consciously, nor yet quite unconsciously, he gave rein to libidinous fantasies, seeking thereby to lose sight of the one beloved face whose beauty had power to pluck the heart out of him, for the censor in his mind forbade the conjunction of sacred and profane. In imagination he clipped hungrily to his arms that slim, dark-eyed, post-office girl at whom he had sometimes glanced with idle admiration. Her mouth was warm velvet under his; her supple body shuddered amorously in his embrace; she had no thoughts, no personality, no independent being, but was merely an appetite responsive to his own. His pulse beat fast; fever mounted in his cheeks; and he closed his eyes for a moment lest anyone—Mr Noom or another—should see in them the picture that they were seeing. 'I want a pound and a half of best lard, young man.' Certainly madam, prompted his mind; and his voice took the hint. It was a beastly shame to think of a respectable girl in that way, and a girl he didn't care twopence for, had hardly spoken to. A shame it was. . . . But was it? It could do her no harm; it was a dead secret; nobody knew. It wasn't as if. . . . And didn't he perhaps care for her, after all? Maybe he had been really in love with her, in a sort of way, all the time. 'And the next

article, please?' Frances Hunt. I s'pose they call her Fanny at home. Fanny Hunt. A pretty name. He began saying the name soundlessly to himself, thoughtfully, tenderly, over and over again. And when her face flashed back into his mind, he was startled to observe how extremely pretty it was. Dark eyes, a small pouting mouth, black hair recently 'put up', a straight demure nose—who could help being in love with such attractions as these! 'That'll be three shillings and sixpence halfpenny altogether, madam. Thank you very much.'

In the evening, when the shop was closed, he received permission to go out. It was an open secret that he sometimes visited the Green Man, and when mildly challenged by his employer it had been sufficient defence to invoke the name of Pummice, that good and prosperous citizen. But tonight he found, of his three friends, only Mr Farthing.

'What you doing here, Mr Farthing?' asked Egg with a grin. 'Band of Hope night, isn't it?'

'Don't talk about hope to me, Mr Pandervil. I'd rather have a drink.' Mr Farthing, having for a moment contemplated this remark of his in silence, greeted it with a smile and a nod. He seemed to see possibilities in it. He chuckled. And finally he leaned confidentially towards his companion and asked with the air of a tipster. 'See here, Mr Pandervil, what do I want with hope for? I've got something better than hope in this glass.' he winked. 'Yes, something better than hope.'

'Ha, ha!' laughed Egg. For in the past Mr

Farthing had made him laugh sincerely, and would doubtless, when fortune favoured him, repeat the benefaction; and it would have been churlish to discourage him now by failing to be amused. 'But what I say is this, Mr Farthing. Let's go to-night, you and me, and see the Magic Lantern.'

'And sing the hymns?' asked Farthing sarcastically.

'Well, what's the matter with a hymn or two? You sing 'em every Sunday, don't you, same as the rest of us.'

'I do no such thing, let me tell you. I listen. That's all.'

'Same thing,' said Egg. 'Sing or listen, it's all one.'

Mr Farthing shook a sorrowful head. 'No, squire! Not with a voice like mine it isn't.'

This time Egg forgot to laugh, his thoughts busily circling round the special reason he had for wishing to go to the Band of Hope meeting. 'Well, *I*'m going anyhow.'

So they went to the little Mission Room, offshoot of the Chapel, where they found the meeting already begun. Egg, intent on escaping from the unbearable loveliness with which memory tormented him, glanced quickly and covertly round in search of the particular distraction to which he had already in his mind half-committed himself. Yes, she was there. And yes, she was pretty. 'Where's the Magic Lantern?' asked Mr Farthing in a hoarse whisper. She was with an older woman, naturally; too much to hope that she should have been alone. Now that he saw her in

the flesh, a definite and separate person, his imagination respected her and submitted without bridling to the control he instinctively exercised over it. He approached her, in fancy, with a more timid ardour, though he was still too impatient, too urgently driven by his escaping impulse, to decide just how and when, with what words and gestures, the first advances were to be made to her. His mind overleaped the first preliminaries and carried him—impetuous steed that it was—to the moment when he should say: 'Would you mind very much if I was to call you Fanny?' He could hear his voice tremble in saying this, and he could feel his heart leap when her answer came—an answer not in words, but a shy, downcast, loving look. 'Please I want to see the Magic Lantern,' pleaded Mr Farthing in a comic, child's voice. And then he would take her hand and say—what would he say? Cruelly there came back to him that moment—peak of his existence—when there had been no need of words at all, and so with a kind of terror he raced out of his dream, back to the lighted Mission Room, which was now echoing to the strains of a four-part song rendered by two hearty young ladies and two timid young gentlemen whose heads were clustered together, like flowers radiating from one stalk, on the platform:

I'm very fond of a social glass.
And so am I!
And so am I!
It makes the time so pleasantly pass,
But it must be filled with water.

And, at Egg's side, Mr Farthing was urgently, almost desperately, nudging and winking, first preliminaries to the process known as 'sending us all into fits'. Egg grinned perfunctorily, and then with a quick glance renewed his sense of Fanny Hunt. A pretty girl . . . dark, slim . . . oh, a pretty girl, and any man would be lucky who got her. Mr Farthing was making it known to Egg, by means of silent mouthing and other facial exercises, that he proposed to return to the Green Man. 'For a social glass,' he whispered, rapturously smacking his lips over the new rich flavour this phrase had acquired. Egg shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, all right.' Perhaps the spell of Fanny Hunt would be more powerful in absence from her. 'But we mustn't make a row,' he whispered back. Good night, Miss Hunt. Would you mind very much if . . . Good night, Fanny—dear Fanny.

In the Green Man they found, among others, Pummice and Wimmett; and Farthing won great applause by relating and imitating what had happened at the Band of Hope. Egg, though rallied from time to time for his absentmindedness—'Regular old oyster, eh Mr Pummice? Regular jolly old native oyster, what do *you* say, Mr. Wimmett?'—was left for the most part with his private thoughts. Fanny, I've been dying to talk to you. Ever since I first saw you, in the post office it was (or was it in the street? He didn't know at all), I've wanted to—well, to sort of talk to you, and tell how much I . . . Fanny, do you think that some day you might get to sort of . . . like me?

'Patience on a monument, eh Mr Pandervil?' said Pummice.

Egg smiled a vague response, his hand closing eagerly on darling Fanny's. 'Let's have another pint all round,' he suddenly blurted out, eager to atone for his silence. 'Some of that good old strong stuff, Mrs Hemp.' And after a few mouthfuls of the good old strong stuff his fancies flowed more easily and happily. Soon they were married, he and Fanny, after a short and passionate courtship. They were alone together for the first time in their little home. She was so precious to him that he couldn't leave go of her hand, couldn't stop stroking her smooth flushed cheek, and noting one by one, with quick glancing eyes, her several points of charm—items in a delicious feast. 'Well, friends, the same again all round?' But the feast was not delicious. Even here, in this dark alley of the imagination, he was pursued by that which reduced all his careful cunning make-believe to a handful of sour dust. He emptied his glass and gazed stupidly at the approach of another. When he rose to greet it, the room was filled with a faint haze through which he could see walls and furniture and men swaying in a curious and rather unpleasant manner. Being sure that his friend Mr Pummice was about to fall, he thrust out a helping hand, and then, with some suddenness, sat down. His brain cleared a little. He felt better. But now he was lying in the long cool grass of an orchard, with Monica, lovely Monica, bending over him. One instant in heaven; then, cast out and damned.

'I think I'd better be getting along back,' he heard himself say. But no one else seemed to hear him. He repeated the remark in a louder tone, and was angry to see the conversation go on, the mouths open and shut, the faces grin and sway towards each other, as though nothing had happened. He rose unsteadily, threateningly, and roared at the top of his voice: 'C-c-curse you for a lot of louts!' There was silence, an abrupt silence followed by discreet laughter. Mrs Hemp bustled forward indignantly. 'Why, Mr Pandervil, I'm surprised at you!' The truth burst in upon his fuddled intelligence: O Lord, I'm drunk! And at once he was sober.

He was sober, that is to say, as to the intelligence. Abdominally he was drunk, and he found as he lurched through the streets with Farthing as a prop one side of him, and Wimmett the other, that he had all but lost control of his legs. But at least his personality was no longer submerged; he was gloomily aware of his condition, and with the night air fanning his brow he was even clearheaded enough to begin retracing the steps that had led him into this pit of folly. To begin, but not to go on to the end; for try as he might he could not get past Monica. The night with its billowing road and reeling stars was a cup in which he tasted again —proud now to be so compelled, and a hero but for that ungovernable nausea in the stomach—the anguish of his lost love. He seized Farthing by the arm and said intensely: 'Farthing, old boy! Dear old boy Farthing! I wanta tell you about

——' But he checked the sacred name in time, and a spasm of self-disgust shook him.

They piloted him to the shop and waited with him until, in response to a timid knock, light footsteps could be heard approaching. It was very late; he had never been so late before; but not until the door was opened did he begin to consider what this escapade might mean to him. Certainly disgrace, perhaps dismissal. He heard a cheerful voice saying: 'That you Egg? Come in, do! It's cold.' Relief and gratitude took shape in the fog of his brain. It was Carrie, good old Carrie, in an overcoat not quite concealing her nightdress, and with a candle in her hand.

He stepped carefully across the threshold. 'Awf'lly sorry wake you up,' he said.

'Oh, I wasn't asleep. That don't matter.' Her voice was intimate, confidential, a pleasant husky whisper. 'I sat up—in my bedroom, you know, reading and what not. But I say, Egg, you're a fine old cup of tea to stay out till this time of night. You won't half catch it, I reckon, from Par'n'Ma! . . . Shut the door, do! It's cold as charity.'

Something of this reached him. He shut the door with a bang. Something reached him, and he would have got it all in time; but just now a particular question was urgent in him. 'You waited up. Kind of you. Kind Carrie. Very kind.' She moved nearer to him, saying 'Hush!', and pulling at his sleeve to persuade him to hurry to bed. In the candlelight he saw a new Carrie, her familiar face—young, elfish, with a comical little

nose—touched with strangeness. He put his question. 'Thad old man, Carrie. Is he good old man, or bad old man?'

'What do you mean? Go to bed, do!'

'I mean your father. Mist' Noom. He's not a wicked rascal, is he?'

She seized him by the arm and stared up into his face. 'Oh, Egg!' she said, with grief in her voice, 'you've been drinking too much!' The forgotten candle, held carelessly, dripped grease on the floor. 'Lor! Just look at that!'

Why should she care what he did? He didn't know. But she did care; and, hating himself for what he had done, he averted his face in shame and pushed her away. Conscious of her gaze following him he made a blundering ascent of the stairs, and lurched his way into his bedroom. Safely there, he fell into a sitting posture on the bed and began drowsily watching the phantasmagoria of his thoughts.

'Egg, are you all right?' Carrie paused with her candle at his half-open doorway.

He grunted thanks, whereupon she ventured to look in.

'Can you . . . undress yourself?'

'Um.' He nodded. 'Um.'

Taking this for an affirmative, she said 'Good night!' and went away, shutting the door behind her. He was left alone with his darkness . . .

Darkness it was, and sickness, both of body and mind. He woke at some indeterminate hour of the night to find himself huddled on the floor, very

cold and still fully dressed. The darkness was heaving about him. Yet he struggled into a sitting posture, and his hands, swimming as it were through waves of cold nausea, found at last the laces of his boots. He began undressing—a difficult and tedious business. So this was what Carrie had meant. Kind Cannie. Kind Farrie. Kind Fanny. Ah, Fanny! He must keep on thinking about Fanny. And he got into bed thinking about her, a bed that at first floated round and round the room, and then up and up and up to the ceiling, but came at last to a standstill so that he fell asleep, fell into a landscape slashed with bright colours and filled with a heavenly voice, from which, fingers in ears, eyes streaming, he ran and ran to the very edge of the world. At the edge of the world he found his bed and his bedroom and the militant light of day. Someone was thumping on the door. 'It's late, Egg. Get up, do!' He sat up and stared about. A repellent heap of clothes lay on the floor. 'All right. Getting up.' The atmosphere of the bedroom was sour. Himself tasted vile. And as he washed and dressed, he tried to calculate the chances of dismissal. Was I very bad last night? Did I make a noise? And who saw me?

'Do you feel better, Egg?'

He looked, with awkward gratitude, at Carrie, who lingered, friendly and anxious, at the bottom of the stairs. It was evident that she had been waiting there to intercept him. The only friend left in this household, he thought, and more of a

sister to him, in this crisis, than his own sisters had ever been. With her hair drawn up into a bun and revealing a small ear and very pretty nape, Carrie looked very definitely a young woman, and not, as she had seemed three months ago, a schoolgirl. Excitement had changed her appearance, and her relation to Egg; the managing young person very conscious of knowing more about the business than this new assistant had given place to the admiring handmaiden. Her glance was awe-struck, as well as solicitous. Egg was already an event and might at any moment become a scandal; and he himself, although his head was aching and his brain dazed with anxiety, did not fail to read as much in her eyes.

'I'm all right now. Have they said anything about me?'

'No,' said Carrie. 'I don't think they know. Well, not everything, I mean.'

Breakfast passed without incident. He was so late that the others had left the table. For this alone he deserved grave censure, since it was part of his duty to sweep the shop out before breakfast, while Carrie was lighting fires and preparing the meal. But he was glad of his solitude because it relieved him of the bother of pretending to eat. He ate nothing. A cup of tea, very hot and rather weak, made him feel more ready to face the hazards of the morning.

He was at his post a bare ten minutes before the shop opened—unprecedented negligence. Mr Noom, bespectacled and aproned, did not look up

at his entry, but continued making calculations on the lid of a biscuit-tin with the help of a short stub of pencil the point of which he thoughtfully licked from time to time. Was it possible that the old man knew nothing, or that, knowing, he intended to overlook the offence? 'Sorry I'm late, sir,' said Egg. But he spoke so hastily and indistinctly that he was not surprised to receive no answer. The shop was opened and the customers trickled in. At eleven o'clock Mr Noom sauntered into the street, to return ten minutes later with clouded face. It's coming, thought Egg; I'm going to catch it. He felt Mr Noom's stern gaze upon him.

'Now what's the meaning of this, young man! I hope you're ashamed of yourself.'

Feeling like a little boy, Egg stammered: 'Very sorry I was late in, sir. Shan't happen again.'

He was ashamed of the equivocation even as he uttered it. Moreover it did not deceive Mr Noom.

'Late in! Late in! Don't try to trick *me!* You were the worse for liquor, sir, that's what you was. And don't think I don't know because I do know. Understand that. I do know. I know more than you think I know. I'm not a blind bat, let me tell you. Drunk you was. Shouting and brawling in a public house, and had to be carried home. That's fine goings-on for a lad in your position. You'll empty my shop for me before you done.' With scathing irony he added: 'Late in indeed!'

'Now then, Daddy!' Mrs Noom, catfooted, had glided in. 'Now then, Daddy! That's

enough and to spare. Egg Pandervil's *my* boy, and I won't have him bullied I won't."

'But *drunk*, my dear!' Mr Noom's air was half angry, half pleading. 'We're not going to have that, surely to goodness!'

'And he's said he's sorry. So that's enough. And *I'm* no friend to drink, as well you know, Richard Noom. It's a pity if you must take away my character in front of strangers. But there, it's all of a piece.'

To see Mr Noom turn away defeated, and to know himself to have been the whip that scourged him, was the bitterest punishment for Egg that could have been devised. He was uncomfortable, unhappy, and ashamed; and the new unhappiness distracted him from the old. Indeed it filled him, and grew to morbid proportions, till at last, unable bear it any longer, he launched a desperate attack upon Mr Noom's silence.

'Please, Mr Noom!'

'What is it?'

'Please, Mr Noom, you won't take any notice of what . . . of what . . . of what *she* said, will you?'

His employer stared in surprise. 'Meaning Mrs Noom?'

'Yes, sir. Mrs Noom. No call for her to stick up for me. None at all that I can see. I know I was wrong to do what I did. But it was an accident. It sort of happened.'

'I daresay, I daresay. We'll forget about it,' said Mr Noom. 'As for Mrs Noom, we'll forget

what she said too. Sometimes, you know, she says things she don't quite mean. High-spirited, gets carried away. But a better woman, let me tell you, never breathed. Ah, she's been a good wife to me, has Mrs Noom. Where I'd have got to without her I *don't* know.' He stared thoughtfully at distance, a wealth of reminiscence in his china-blue eyes. 'Things would have been different, I fancy,' said Mr Noom, half to himself, 'very, very different.' He sighed, but whether with satisfaction or with regret was more than Egg could tell. And still there seemed to be something on his mind craving utterance. 'I suppose, young Pandervil, you haven't hardly known what it is to have aches and pains?'

'Aches and pains, sir?' Egg was at a loss.

'No, of course not!' said Mr Noom hastily. 'A young feller like you. My time of life, we get these little things. When you're young you don't notice 'em. Snap your fingers at 'em. Me, I'm not so . . . so snappy as I was, that's about the truth of it. Ha ha ha! That's a good one, that is!'

There was something so wintry and desolate about Mr Noom's attempt at mirth that Egg could not forbear asking: 'Is it a special pain you're talking of, Mr Noom?'

'No, no, no, no, no!' murmured Mr Noom, the five words coming so quickly as to give almost the effect of stammering. 'Nothing special. Leastways nothing of much account. And yet . . . well yes, my boy, I'll say *rather* special. Not

special, but *rather* special.' His manner became richly mysterious. 'I'll shew you where it is.' He looked this way and that. The shop was empty but for themselves. The door into the street and the door into the private part of the house, both were shut. 'I'll shew you,' repeated Mr Noom. He laid a hand on the young man's arm. 'Step out here.' And when they stood facing each other in the middle of the shop, Mr Noom, with one last frightened look round, pointed furtively at his stomach. 'It's there,' said Mr Noom. 'No. I'm telling you a lie.' He moved his finger an inch to the left. 'It's *there*.'

'Just a pain?' said Egg, not knowing how to be sympathetic.

'Just a pain,' agreed Mr Noom, brightening a little. 'You might almost say an aching pain.'

'Is it very bad?'

'Sometimes,' said Mr Noom, 'it's worse than other times. Sharpish. Rather nasty. Other times it's dullish and nagging.' Mr Noom smiled. 'Oh, I mustn't complain. It might be a tidy bit worse, there's no doubt.'

'Does it go on always?'

Mr Noom cocked his head on one side and contemplated this question with a judicial air. 'I wouldn't say *always*,' he pronounced cautiously.

'Don't you think,' ventured Egg, ' that you ought to have a doctor?' He was conscious that the proposal was an eccentric one, for in his world, and in the Noom's, no one thought of calling in a doctor while the patient could still walk about and

pursue his calling. 'Couldn't you,' he added, anticipating a particular objection, 'couldn't you slip round and see Doctor Renwick?'

'Yes,' admitted Mr Noom. 'That might be managed. But it'd have to be mighty quick work,' he added, with something like a wink, 'for it would never do to let——'

'Of course not,' agreed Egg.

Mr Noom nodded appreciatively. 'Quite so. You're an understanding lad, young Pandervil! . . . Ah, good evening, Mrs Curtis! And what may I have the pleasure . . . ?'

The pleasure was a protracted one. When it was over, and the gratified customer gone, Mr Noom glanced intimately at Egg and asked: 'Now tell me this, my boy. You're one as keeps his eyes open. Did you ever know of a case like this before? It's just here the pain is.' He patted his stomach. 'Just here. A kind of aching pain that comes and goes. But mostly comes,' he added, with a smile. 'Did you ever meet a case like that before?' Egg shook his head sadly. 'Ah, you haven't!' Mr Noom's face fell. His rosy polished cheeks, his magnified blue eyes, were those of a crestfallen and rather frightened child. 'I thought perhaps you might have,' he said limply. The forced gaiety had vanished from his voice. He looked weary and fragile. But he rallied the next moment. 'Because if you had,' he said, eagerly explanatory, 'if you'd met a case of that kind and they'd got better, indigestion or something, well then, you see . . . ' He paused, glancing self-consciously

at the ground. Then meeting Egg's eyes again, he nodded. 'Well, well, well, well, well!' he volleyed, with brisk cheerfulness.

In the interval Egg had been turning over in his mind a plan. 'Don't you think, Mr Noom, p'raps a bit of a change ud do you good?'

'A change?'

'What I mean to say is,' said Egg, 'a holiday. Go away somewhere.'

'Leave the shop?' Mr Noom was amused and incredulous. 'What's to become of us then? Can't leave me bread and butter, can I now? And Mrs Noom don't like trains, what's more.'

'Oh, I meant alone,' explained Egg. 'I'm sure we could manage the shop, sir, between us. Just for a week or two. Do you good, it would.'

Mr Noom tried to keep calm in face of this astonishing proposal. 'Me go away for a holiday without Mrs Noom. Is that what you're saying?'

Egg admitted that it was. 'Only a few days,' he said. 'Do you good.'

'Well,' replied the old man, 'it's an idea.' His smile radiated benevolent irony. 'Takes a young man to have an idea like that. And there's only one thing against it.'

'What's that?'

'Mrs Noom'd never hear of it. You don't realize, young man, what a bond marriage is. And very right it should be. Do you know I haven't slept a night away from my wife since the day of our nuptials, as you might say, thirty years ago? And a fine thing it would be at my time of life to

go off on a holiday away from that good woman!'

But for all his protestations he was not, it seemed, inflexibly opposed to the plan. He referred to it next day in a style that was only half jocular. And Egg set his wits working to discover how the great release might be contrived. He would enlist Carrie's help. He would even, if need arose, creep into Mrs Noom's good graces again in order to prepare her for persuasion. For Egg, turning gladly away from his sick dreams, found within himself a wellspring of unsuspected energy and mother-wit. He had decided to give his brother-in-law, the Reverend Ernest Twigg, an opportunity for Good Works. Sarah—no great distance away, for had she not once visited him?—must invite Mr Noom to stay at their pleasant little vicarage at West Barnet ('And they all adore Ernest, you know!'). Mrs Noom must be tricked into giving her consent. And at West Barnet Mr Noom must consult a doctor about that little pain of his, that kind of aching pain that came and went and sometimes was worse than other times. So Egg and Carrie hatched the conspiracy, with Mr Noom, knowing something but not everything of what was afoot, growing daily more boyishly excited, more hopeful, more afraid of success.

3

When Ernest and Sarah, with Mr Noom between them, had gone off in a cabriolet—for such was their zeal that they came in person to fetch their

guest, and such their magnificence that they rode from and to the station in a cabriolet—Egg and Carrie exchanged a secret glance of jubilation. Their work of many weeks was at last crowned. What a work it had been! And how nerve-racking the fear that at the last minute Mrs Noom might change her mind and declare that she would not be left! Already there had been scenes of the bitterest recrimination. They began with her dramatic accusation, apropos of nothing and in the middle of supper:

'And so you want to leave me, Richard Noom!'

'My dear! How can you say such a thing?'

Mrs Noom uttered a scornful laugh. 'Huh! It's only what I expected. After thirty years of toil and moil I'm not as young as I was, and you want to be off. I s'pose that girl's behind it, isn't she? . . . Oh, you may shake your head, but I'm not the born fool you think me. When do you want to go, Daddy dear?'

Mr Noom, muttering into his plate, was understood to say that he had no intention of going, that nothing would persuade him to go. He was perhaps, he admitted, a bit run down, and there had been talk of a little change. 'But if you'd rather I stayed at home, my dear . . . '

'I leave it to your conscience,' said Mrs Noom.

But in the end it was she who had insisted on the visit to West Barnet, and he, with an almost bitter passion, had opposed it. Perhaps this very opposition had decided her in favour of the scheme; or perhaps it was with the intention of providing her-

self with a new grievance that she had finally forced him to accept the invitation. 'So thoughtful of Mrs Reverend Twigg, Richard. And I'm sure it'll put you to rights, seeing as you're so sadly. Plump as butter, to my way of thinking, but that doesn't always signify, does it, Daddy dear!' And now, despite all his protests, Mr Noom had been packed off; and his wife, with wan smiles and an occasional long quivering sigh, from time to time came into the shop, where Egg and Carrie were both serving, and swept the scene with a mournful glance.

Supper that evening was a silent meal. The two juniors exchanged a chaffing word or two, but were careful to conceal the gaiety that bubbled within them. Mrs Noom resisted all their attempts to draw her into the conversation. But when supper was over she spoke:

'A nice pair you are to be sure! Leaving me alone on a night like this!'

'Alone? What d'you mean, Ma?' Carrie was by many degrees less deferential than her father.

'Ask yourself what I mean, miss. Thirty years of happy married life and never a parting before. And do you and the young smarty here try to make it up to me with a little bit of kindness? Not you. Sit and snigger among yourselves, that's more your style.'

'Well I never *did!*' cried Carrie, grimacing her indignant astonishment. 'Haven't we bin talking to you all supper-time! And could we get a word out of you? *That* we couldn't.'

There followed another silence, a silence more profound than that which had preceded the storm. Presently Egg, thinking to ease the situation, began whistling *The Bells of Kilgenny;* whereupon Mrs Noom, sighing deeply, rose and left the room. Half an hour later she returned, thrust her head accusingly round the edge of the door, and said sharply: 'Carrie, I can't bear it any longer. Alone in the house with that young hooligan! You must write and tell your poor father to come home at once.'

So for a while Egg was 'that young hooligan', looked at askance, if looked at at all, and never addressed directly except to be commanded. Even Carrie was intimidated into pretending disapproval of him in her mother's presence, though in private she was at pains to shew him, by numerous little impulsive attentions, that her friendliness was in no danger of abating. And this contrast between her public and her private manner was another little secret between them; so that on the whole Egg enjoyed being 'that young hooligan' more than he enjoyed his subsequent reinstatement in Mrs Noom's favour. Several days must elapse before Mr Noom could return. Carrie delayed writing the letter of recall as long as she dared; and the post office could be relied upon not to despatch and deliver it in indecent haste. And there was time enough, in the interval, for Mrs Noom to forgive the young man for an offence he had never committed, an offence which indeed had never been defined by the accuser. After the

first twenty-four hours of hostility the burden of her complaint mysteriously changed. Hooligan he might be and doubtless was; but the real ugly truth about him now appeared to be that he was a nasty young snob who thought himself too good to be serving in a grocer's shop, and not to be wondered at neither with his sister a parson's wife and I don't know what all. Not to be wondered at, as Mrs Noom freely admitted, but a person had her rights to common civility; *and* respect, what was more, being old enough to be his mother; and though she named no names, nothing being further from her thoughts, she had heard of folks, and perhaps a person might be allowed to say it in their own house, she *had* heard of folks which their heads were swollen too big for their boots. Moreover, the argument triumphantly concluded, if some folks wasn't grocers some other folks might find themselves in difficulties. 'Don't sneer and snigger at me, young man!' cried Mrs Noom to her embarrassed victim. 'Carrie, perhaps you'd have the kindness to ask your high-class friend, Mr Pandervil, not to make game of your mother at the supper-table.' Suppertime, the only meal at which all the members of the household met without fear of interruption by the shop-bell, was the hour dedicated to Mrs Noom's exhibitions.

But on the morning of the day when Mr Noom's premature return from West Barnet was expected, Egg suddenly found himself restored in Mrs Noom's affections. Without warning and without cause she became her old gracious self to him. The

change began at breakfast and became more and more marked as the day wore on, until, by the time (late in the afternoon) when Mr Noom appeared, honey itself was not so sweet as Mrs Noom. But her sweetness was not for her husband. Mr Noom, passing through the shop with a hurried greeting to Egg, approached with every sign of eagerness the glass-panelled door leading from shop to parlour. But when he stretched out his hand towards the door-knob, the door was flung suddenly open and Mrs Noom stood there within two feet of him. Her eyes were wide and shining, shining with appreciation, perhaps, of the scene she had planned. 'Welcome home, Richard!' she cried. 'I ask no questions, mind you, where you've bin and who you've bin with. I've learnt my lesson and I ask no questions. Welcome home!' She seized him by the arms and drew him into the inner room. The door was then closed, and Egg heard no more.

He heard no more to the purpose until late that same night when the voice of Carrie, urgent and frightened at the keyhole, dragged him out of bed. 'Egg! Please get up at once!'

'What's the matter?'

'It's Ma. She's in a terrible taking.'

Egg opened the door and peered round it into Carrie's small excited face. 'Ill, is she?' Carrie gasped out a 'Yes.' 'Right-O!' he said. 'Won't be a jiffy.'

She waited outside the half-open door while he scrambled into some clothes. He could feel her waiting. And when he came out of the room she

greeted him with moist clutching hands. 'She's dying, Egg. Isn't it *awful!*' Her young body shuddered, and tears were in her voice. 'She's dying, and she wants you to read the Bible to her.' She pattered down the passage.

'Dying? How d'you know?' he whispered, following her.

And why *me* to read the Bible to her? he asked himself, pausing outside the conjugal bedroom. Neither question received an answer. 'Have you been for the doctor?' asked Egg.

Carrie was so close to him in the darkness that he could feel her warm breath on his bare throat. 'I'm going at once,' she said, 'though Ma said not to. Here, take this and go in, do!"

He felt something cold and hard being thrust into his hand. His fingers told him, in the dark, that it was shiny and black, and that it exuded a faint cold Sabbatical smell. He tapped hesitatingly upon the door of the Noom's bedroom. 'Go right in!' said Carrie impatiently. 'She sent for you, I tell you!' With that, Carrie herself opened the door and gave him so violent a push that he almost fell, black Bible in hand, into the arms of Mr Noom, who, with trousers braced over his night-shirt, rushed into the passage. And a harsh voice from the bed cried out: 'Richard, I *forbid* you to go for the doctor. Let me die in peace.' Mr Noom came back.

The room was small and murky. It contained a double bed, a yellow wardrobe, an ottoman, and a wash-stand. A chest of drawers, on which stood

a mirror, had been placed with some care in front of the window; and in front of the mirror, and reflected in it, burned a candle. The air was full of fustiness and the smell of candlegrease; and the bed was full of Mrs Noom who sat bolt-upright, grotesque in her night-dress and curl-papers, with her arms outstretched in the attitude of crucifixion, and a kind of angry exultation blazing in her eyes. She moaned and swayed her body to and fro. 'A-a-a-ah! I's like a knife! It's like a knife!'

Her husband, beside himself with anxiety yet unable after all these years to break the habit of obedience, scampered to and fro in a very frenzy of indecision. 'You hear her, Pandervil? We *must* have the doctor to her, whatever she says!'

'It's all right,' said Egg. He caught the old man by the shoulder and whispered into his ear: 'Carrie's fetching him.'

'Where's the pain, my dear?' cried Mr Noom, running to the bed again. 'We've got you safe. Tell me where the pain is.'

'It's here!' murmured Mrs Noom, clutching at her stomach.

'Ah, there!' said Mr Noom. He shot a swift significant look at Egg. 'Did you see that, my boy. It's *there*, poor thing!'

'And it's here!' cried Mrs Noom, clutching her temples. 'Is Egbert Pandervil in the room, Richard?'

'Here I am,' said Egg, coming nearer the bed. 'Here I am, Mrs Noom.'

'Ah!' She moaned again. 'Egg Pandervil!

My only friend in this dreadful, dreadful house. Will you read me a portion of the Word, please, Egg Pandervil?'

'What shall I read?'

'Read the thirty-seventh psalm, Egg . . . Ah, it's like a knife! The thirty-seventh psalm.'

Egg went to the end of the bed and stationed himself by the chest of drawers. Holding the Bible aslant, so that the candlelight should fall upon it, he began fumbling in search of the right page. His trembling fingers were reluctant to obey him. But at last he found the place and in hurried, apologetic voice he began reading: 'Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb . . . '

The voice from the bed broke in upon his reading. 'Evildoers, Richard Noom. Mark that. Evildoers. Oh thank God there's one friend with me when I die. Ah, but I'll try to forgive you, Richard; deceitful trash as you are, I'll try to forgive you. You and that loose woman . . . '

Her husband, kneeling at the bedside, buried his face in his hands and murmured an inarticulate protest. 'Go on reading, Egg,' said Mrs Noom. 'Never mind this evildoer here. It's a treat to hear you read. Go on.'

Egg read on: 'Trust in the Lord and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. Delight thyself also in the Lord; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.' Im-

perceptibly he paused at this promise, wondering what it could mean. But the sense of that waiting woman and that sobbing man made him hurry on; for the Bible was a holy book and there was no knowing what magic it might work. Yet as he read he became musingly aware of pictures in his mind that were more real than the tawdry scene in which he stood. There was something in these words that meant more to him than their meaning. ' . . . the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace. The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. The Lord shall laugh at him; for he seeth that his day is coming . . . '

'Ah, yes!' cried Mrs Noom. 'Your day is coming, Richard, there's no doubt of that.'

Egg raised his voice, impatient of the interruption and eager to shout down the cruel voice from the bed: 'The wicked have drawn out the sword, and have bent their bow, to cast down the poor and needy, and to slay such as be of upright conversation. Their sword shall enter into their own heart, and their bows shall be broken.' Sick with terror and disgust though he was, the ring of these sentences recalled to him, for less than an instant, the sunlit interior of the church at home, where he had sat Sunday by Sunday, with Willy at his side, dreaming indolent and vaguely splendid dreams; it recalled, too, by what association he could not tell and did not pause to inquire, that morning in the orchard when Monica had shown him those verses —'Nor did I wonder at the lily's white . . .'—

which were the only verses he had ever committed to memory. But the drab room quickly returned to him; the spiritual squalor again assailed his nostrils; for Mrs Noom, achieving the climax of her melodrama, gave a loud scream and fell back upon the pillow. 'My death's on me. Lord Jesus, I come!'

In the profound silence that followed—for the overwrought husband seemed bereft now of the power of sound—there came a tap at the door, a tap so cool and businesslike that Egg stared across at the door in startled expectancy, almost thinking to see Death himself enter, a traditional figure with shrouded face. 'May I come in?' said a quiet unconcerned voice. And without waiting for an answer, without indeed allowing time for one, Dr Renwick walked into the room followed by Carrie. He walked straight to the bed and looked intently at the prostrate woman. When his fingers touched the pulse in her wrist she opened her eyes and glared at him malevolently. 'It's all right, Mrs Noom,' said the doctor. 'We'll soon make you comfortable . . . Pulse normal, and no fever. Where did you say the pains were?'

'Richard!'

'Yes, my dear?'

'Have you brought a doctor to see me?'

'Yes, my dear.'

'Then I'll never forgive you. You Judas!'

Unperturbed, the doctor continued his examination. 'Don't be frightened, Mrs Noom. It's rest you're needing. I'll give you something to help

you sleep.' He made signs to Carrie to fetch him a glass. 'Come, try to sit up for a moment.' With his arm round her shoulders he persuaded her into a sitting posture. 'Now . . . ' He poured something from a bottle into the glass Carrie held out to him, and having taken the glass presented it to the patient's lips. Mrs Noom, with mouth firmly closed, stared hatred at him. 'Now drink a little of this.' He gave back stare for stare. A faint ironical smile curled about his lips. Mrs Noom opened her lips and drank.

The doctor turned solicitously to Mr Noom. 'No cause for anxiety at all, my dear sir. No cause at all,' he repeated with significance.

'You mean . . . ' stammered Mr Noom, unable to believe in his good fortune, 'she's not going to die?'

The doctor laughed shortly. 'We're all going to die. What's her age? Fifty-seven? Well, I don't give her more than another thirty years . . . And now I'll get back to my bed. Good night.'

'Do you mean . . . ' said Mr Noom, following the doctor to the door, 'are you suggesting that there's nothing the matter with my poor wife?'

'Nothing at all, unless . . . ' The doctor bent over Mr Noom and whispered something inaudible to Egg.

'Daddy!' Again that screaming voice, but there was already drowsiness in it. 'If you and the doctor are plotting to put me away, let me tell you I won't have it, so there! I'm as sane as any woman alive.'

The doctor bowed to her. 'Then your only possible excuse is denied to you, madam. Good night.'

The door closed on the departing doctor, and on Carrie who went to escort him downstairs. Mrs Noom, with a sigh, nestled into her pillow and in a few minutes was asleep. Her husband, moving stealthily, seated himself in a chair at the side of the bed and made ready for a night of vigilance.

'Won't you try to get a bit of rest!' whispered Egg in his ear. Mr Noom shook his head sadly. 'There's my bed if you care to have it. I'm going to stay up now I am up.' Mr Noom shook his head still more emphatically. 'He said there was nothing the matter, you know,' urged Egg.

In response to this final appeal, Mr Noom's benevolent features were twisted into a shape of scorn and wrath. 'That fellow!' he whispered hoarsely. 'He doesn't know what he's about. And he's no gentleman. Good God, Pandervil, he tried to make me believe the poor woman was shamming, and her in such terrible pain!'

Egg, afraid to say more, tiptoed his way out of the room and went downstairs. In the kitchen he found a lamp lit, an oil-stove burning, and Carrie.

'Is she asleep?' asked Carrie. He nodded. 'Then we may as well make ourselves comfortable. I'm glad you've come down. Myself, I can't sleep after all that set-out.'

Egg stood over the stove, warming his hands. 'Why is she such a beast to him?' he asked. 'Why is she such a rotten beast? Does she hate him?'

Carrie shrugged her shoulders. 'Huh! She

loves him. Like a dog loves a bone she loves him. He's been away for a day or two, so he's got to be paid out for it. That's all it is.'

Habitual ways of thought made Egg say to himself: What a way for a girl to speak of her mother! He was a little shocked, for it seemed wrong to him that Carrie should criticize her mother as freely as he did, a mere stranger. Another thought came, and he expressed it feelingly. 'If I was married to a woman like your Ma, Carrie, I just wouldn't stand it. Your father's too easy with her by half. If it was me I'd walk out of the house and never see her again.'

Carrie looked at him thoughtfully. 'I daresay you would.' After a pause she added: 'But you don't know Ma.'

It was true. He didn't know Ma. There were, indeed, many things that Egg, at twenty-four, didn't know.

4

Time passed slowly in Farringay, because, although there was much to occupy Egg, both in the shop and out of it, life had become for him nowadays a series, superficially, of repetitions. He never, happily for himself, became fully and continuously aware of repetition, never observed with disgust or dismay how like one day was to another, and how week followed week like a row of impressions made by the same rubber stamp. He did not observe this, because such observations were not part of his mental habit; he could not have

observed it because, indeed, it was not, in any fundamental sense, true. True as it might have seemed to a clearsighted but unreflecting spectator, the very existence of Egg, in whom everything but his own indestructible identity was incessantly however subtly changing, availed to prevent its being so. The fingers of time were never idle upon him; they took his plastic form, and, with a caress here, a thrust there, they secretly and imperceptibly remodelled him. His mind to its old store added multitudinous images gathered from the new environment, experienced sensations, needing only utterance to make them thoughts, that rose out of the ceaseless chemical action going on inside him between past and present. In Farringay things seemed always much as usual. The village continued more and more resolutely to affiliate itself to the great metropolis six miles distant; the beneficent Blogg (and Brother) continued to build his rows of villas; more shops sprang up, and competition became keener; there was talk of a local theatre; Mr Pummice continued to quote, and to attribute fragments of Longfellow, Mrs Hemans, Isaac Watts, Martin Tupper, and others, to 'the Bard of Avon'; Mr Farthing continued to despise Teetotalism and all its works; and Mr Wimmett continued to wish that he could lay his hand on a fifty-pound note. At Noom's, life ran in its accustomed grooves. Mr Noom, save on the subject of his wife, from time to time opened his heart to Egg; Egg, though his affections were ungrudgingly bestowed, kept his own heart closed; Carrie

remained as dependable and cheerful and managing as ever; and Mrs Noom, who breathed melodrama as her native element and was never herself without it, continued, in obedience to the law of self-preservation, manufacturing that element in all places and at all seasons. Everything was the same except—and the exception, however trite, is great enough to rob the statement of significance—except that everyone was growing older.

Further afield more obvious changes were taking place. The Ridge Farm, Egg heard, had changed hands, and the Pandervil family was scattered to the four points of the compass. Flisher had become the third wife of Sam Reddick the dairyman, who was fifteen years her senior; Martha was employed as nursemaid in the pretty rural district of Muswell Hill; Jane, still a child, was once more under the care of sister Sarah; and Jinny Randall had been romantically met, and seized, and married, and translated to Manchester, by a commercial gentleman named Glover who happened, in the course of his duties, to pass through Keyborough. And what of Algernon himself, by whom these events were reported? The choicest fate of all had been reserved for Algernon, who seemed to have blossomed into a luxuriant and exotic growth since the removal of his parents' authority and his brother's innocent competition. It appeared that his bit of schooling had, as he said, come in useful. He had been taken on as a clerk by no less a personage than Mr Fox, of Fox, Fox, Fox and Nephew, the leading auctioneer in Mercester, and was rapid-

ly, if his own account was to be trusted, climbing high into favour with his employers. Fast following his letter came Algernon himself, eager, after a lapse of two years, to see, as he said, young Egg again.

Whatever changes the years had wrought in Egg were neither conspicuous nor unexpected; but Algernon they had re-created, filling out his person (always a plump person), giving an air of importance to his carriage, enriching his voice with the deep velvet tones of self-satisfaction, and leaving only so much of the old Algernon as to make it demonstrable that this was indeed he and no impudent, well-fed, plausible impostor. Having sent warning of his visit, he secured—and by post, without requiring his brother's intervention—a room at the Green Man. And there, wearing a magnificent check suit, a crimson waistcoat, and a stock that was fully the equal of Mr Pummice's, he received and entertained young Egg. He was wonderfully genial and benevolent. His voice boomed, and he went on shaking Egg's hand so heartily, so long, and with such ample pumping movement, as to cause some little embarrassment to the recipient of this honour. 'Well, old man,' said Algernon, 'and how's things with you? I hear from old Sarah that you're getting along famous. In business, I mean. Bray-vo, *Eggie!* Nothing like business, is there? Ah, nothing.' Egg, unfeignedly glad to see his brother, was hypnotized into attempting an imitation of this bluff cordiality. But it was Algernon who did

most of the talking. Algernon, to do him justice, was pleased with the world, with Farringay, with the quality of his accommodation, with Egg, no less than with himself. He described nearly everything that was shewn him, nearly every piece of news that Egg gave him, as 'capital, capital, old man'. He was very free, too, with diminutives. 'I shouldn't wonder, old man, between you and me and the feather bed, I shouldn't wonder if there wasn't a nice little partnership coming the way of yours truly before many moons are out, as they say.' In one of the less frequented lanes of Farringay he interrupted Egg's answer to an urgent question of his own in order to give a performance in his best auctioneering style. In two minutes he sold a score of sheep at extravagant prices. It was his own opinion, 'though I don't go in for chucking bowkays at myself, old man,' that he could get the bids, and take the bids, and keep the patter going, as smart as any fellow in Mercester; and Egg, who found difficulty in distinguishing one word from another of his brother's passionate professional gabble, warmly agreed that it must be so. 'I don't say,' said Algernon, 'that I haven't had a nice little bit of practice, for that would be telling you a lie. And practice, as they say, makes perfect. I daresay you've found that out in your business, old man.' And just as Egg was making yet another desperate attempt to describe the life of a grocer Algernon burst in with: 'Yes, I know, old man. Jolly interesting it must be. Only too glad to see you settled and

that's a fact. As for me, I've got a nice little billet and I don't mind admitting it. What's more—' He smiled and winked and unconsciously expanded his chest before leaning close to his brother's ear to say confidentially: 'What's more, Egg old son, there's a certain little woman out Flaxted way. Nothing settled yet, of course. Time enough for that when that little partnership comes along. But I fancy we understand one another. Trust *me*.' At the end of his brief visit, Algernon repeated with augmented enthusiasm the pumping operation that had signalized his greeting. 'Well, all the best, old man,' he said. 'It's been nice to see you and talk over old times. Bye bye, boy!' Algernon's visit was perhaps the most highly coloured incident that occurred during the drab period that followed Mrs Noom's deathbed performance.

Meanwhile that alien life in Mr Noom, to which his 'rather special pain' bore witness, was doing very nicely indeed, and at Mr Noom's expense. In fact it had by now become evident—to the doctor, to Egg, and to Mr Noom himself not least—that there was not room in the world for both of them. In short, Mr Noom's little pain was killing Mr Noom. An operation was out of the question, for, even had Dr Renwick been able to anticipate the methods of Lister, any attempt at surgery must have killed the sufferer outright. Without it he might have the good luck to live for many months in torment such as a man would be sent to prison for allowing a dog to endure.

But there existed no special society for the prevention of cruelty to old gentlemen, so Mr Noom, having finally taken to his bed, continued, with sobs and animal grunts and screaming invocations of his God (a reticent personage), to advertise from time to time the sanctity of human life. Dr Renwick did all, within the law, that he could, and for the last few days of existence Mr Noom was comparatively comfortable, being conscious for not much more than an aggregate of one hour during each twenty-four, and for that hour too weak to suffer acutely. Mr Noom's vitality, the unsuspected strength, as of youth itself, which, surviving in his old body, had cruelly insisted on fighting the intruder to the last ditch, was now all but spent. Things had reached the stage when it is permitted to hope, almost in so many words, that the end will come soon. Again and again Egg would steal to the door of the room and glance towards the nurse with an eager question forming on his lips. Again and again she would sadly shake her head. It goes on and on, thought Egg. On and on. It's too much. It's wicked. But he himself had the shop to attend to; that was the best he could do for Mr Noom, and it was, he felt, nothing at all. He was glad when Carrie, against her wish, was sent to spend her evenings and nights at a neighbour's house; that had been Dr Renwick's counsel. And if he had had an emotion to spare it would perhaps, a little of it, have been spent on Mrs Noom, who, having worn her scepticism threadbare and indulged her

scorn of Dr Renwick to the utmost degree, could no longer disguise from herself that she was about to be widowed. At last, at last, her Richard was escaping from her. Indefatigable in her devotion now, she was yet visibly consumed with jealousy of the nurse, finding it intolerable that during these last few weeks, with her lust for possession at its height, she must take second place to this smooth-faced hussy in uniform. The doctor and the nurse were so clearly, she said, conspiring to oust her from her rightful position as lawful wedded wife. Egg sometimes, for the sake of distraction, tried to guess what was going on in the private mind of this inexplicable woman. Life had now thrust upon her a part grandiose enough, in its anguish and terror, to satisfy even such a passion for melodrama as hers; and if she overacted the part—well, that was hardly to be wondered at, and it did not mean that she was not suffering her share of the fear and pain that vibrated through the household. No doubt she was bewildered, even frightened, to find that events, and Richard Noom in particular, would no longer submit to her management; and perhaps it was not her fault, but rather an accident of temperament, that she so often had the air of implying that this disease of Mr Noom's was a piece of gross insubordination on his part which she could never bring herself to forgive him. At long last, after a lifetime of unexampled marital docility, Mr Noom was doing something without her permission: he was dying.

On the last morning Mr Noom rallied a little, emerged for a while from the drug-dimmed nightmare of his life and was able to indulge in some quiet fragmentary conversation. His wife was with him. He asked for Carrie, and, a moment later, for Egg. The nurse, slipping from the room, brought these messages to Egg in the shop. A customer volunteered to fetch Carrie. 'Will he get better then?' asked Egg of the nurse. She shook her head. He followed her upstairs.

'Morning, Mr Noom!'

'Hullo, my boy!' Mr Noom smiled beatifically, a child's smile. 'Do you know,' he said, in a small, remote, hesitating voice, 'I feel wonderful better this morning. Soon be out and about again. Hey, nurse?'

Mrs Noom, seizing his hand, began to weep. 'Have you been happy with me, Richard?' she wailed. 'Say something to your wife.'

The nurse, pushing her aside without ceremony, smothered the question by saying, with a swift smile: 'You do me credit, Mr Noom. I've never had such a good easy patient before.'

Mr Noom, vaguely and uncertainly, smiled back at her. 'Where's my Carrie?' he asked after a pause.

'I think I hear her coming,' said Egg. There were quick footsteps on the stairs. 'That's her, I bet.'

Mrs Noom stood rigid at the bedside. Her glance of hatred travelled from face to face. Egg, shocked into staring at her, shuddered in the act

of conjecturing what mighty and implacable passions were flaming behind that mask. These were strangers, she seemed to be thinking, thrust between her and the man, her own man, whom she was seeing alive for perhaps the last time. And now they proposed to bring yet another on the scene, a girl, this Carrie. Perhaps in that galling moment of defeat—for indeed we must make what excuses we can for her—she crazily confused Carrie with another young woman, the wench whom once, a quarter of a century ago, in the scullery, Mr Noom had kissed. But this was not in Egg's mind; his thoughts and his eyes were on Mrs Noom herself, who, suddenly, relaxing the stiffness of her attitude, swooped like a hawk to the bed and whispered, eyeing her husband fixedly: 'Don't see her, Daddy! Tell her to keep away till you're better!'

The light went out of Mr Noom's face. He stared perplexedly at her bright eyes, now so near his own. From the passage outside came the sound of a hesitating step, and then a little cough of nervousness.

'Quick! Say: "Another time, Carrie!" say: "Don't come in!"'

'Carrie?' repeated Mr Noom questioningly. His lip quivered. Reluctantly he met his wife's look, and he seemed to understand what he read there. 'You tell her, my dear.' His eyes closed in weariness, and quickly Mrs Noom glided to the door in time to intercept Carrie's entry. She closed and locked the door, and came back, almost smiling, to

the bedside. The nurse with gentle fingers was now stroking the pain-crumpled face on the pillow; in her other hand she still held the hypodermic needle. Egg had seen and heard everything. He had seen and heard more than he could bear to remember, and his heart ached with a question. Why had the old man flashed that signal to his merciful sister? Had it been indeed a return of bodily pain, or an agony more exquisite, more subtly cruel? . . . And now Mr Noom, his face twitching no longer, was drifting quietly into sleep. He slept for nine hours, and did not wake again.

5

The day after the funeral, a singular orgy which seemed to give general satisfaction, Mrs Noom took to her bed and remained there, magnificent in sorrow, for a week; and Carrie was kept busy all day long running up and down stairs in a hopeless endeavour to satisfy all her mother's demands. This additional burden, though it fatigued the girl, helped to distract her from grief; and she herself, spending a quiet evening in the kitchen with Egg, audibly thanked God for Mrs Noom's voluntary sequestration.

'It's nice and comfy here, int it?' said she.

'Um,' answered Egg, affirmatively, and went on reading. He was reading a work (for the Use of Schools and Young Persons) entitled *Goldsmith's Geography*, the flyleaf of which bore an inscrip-

tion, in faded ink: *To our dear nephew Richard Noom for his* 21 *birth-day, from Uncle and Aunty Bunce, Jany,* 1815. *The lips of the wise disperse knowledge: but the heart of the foolish doeth not so. Proverbs xv.* 7. It was not perhaps precisely the reading he would have chosen, but of the fourteen books that comprised Mr Noom's library this was the only one he had never before looked at. And indeed he was enthralled by it, for its very existence proved that there were other places in the world than Farringay. He had just reached a reference to certain 'enormous mirrors, the costly donations of infidel kings', which the reverend author had observed in the Sultan Mother's Chamber of Audience at Constantinople. In those mirrors Egg saw himself reflected. He was translated into a world of strange splendour. And presently he came upon this magical sentence: 'These mirrors the women of the Seraglio sometimes break in their frolics.' Under the spell of this incantation he allowed the book to fall into his lap, and to lie there unregarded, while he stared at the little red heart of the kitchen-grate and in opulent day-dreaming lost all sense of his surroundings, all memory of dark and mortuary things. Enticing pictures danced in his mind, and for a while he surrendered himself drowsily to their queer wicked charm. For so many days he had dwelt on death, and on death in those viler aspects which the horrific pomp of burial had made conspicuous, that now, with all the impetus of reaction, his thoughts made holiday and disported

wantonly in the oriental palace of his fancy. A falling cinder roused him, and he glanced towards Carrie. At once his mood changed. Poor Carrie! She looked inexpressibly forlorn. Tears glistened on her lashes, glistened and swelled and tumbled on to her young pallid cheeks.

He leaned forward and touched her knee. 'Cheer up, Carrie!'

The smile with which she responded hurt him even more sharply than her tears had done. A warm protective impulse woke in him. He got out of his chair and came near to her, placing a hand on her shoulder. She was not, perhaps, a pretty girl; but to-night she seemed touchingly young. She, like himself, was lonely. For her, as for him, the future was an inscrutable grey mystery.

At his touch she looked up at him with swimming eyes. 'Oh Egg!'

'Cheer up!' he said again. 'I'll take care of you, you know.' His fingers, without instructions from himself, touched her throat, involuntarily making a cup for her chin to rest in.

'Oh Egg!' she said again. 'Do you mean . . .?'

What did he mean? Something in his mind shouted Danger! He ignored the shout. 'I mean,' he said, lamely, 'well, that I'll . . . take care of you . . . if you'll let me.'

His free hand found itself to be free no longer; moist warm fingers were entwined with his own. Carrie closed her eyes, as if they were saying too much, and nestled closer into the curve of his arm. What she was thinking he did not know,

but her mouth was waiting to be kissed, and he, alas, wanted to kiss it. Events were sweeping him off his feet, and, despite a pang of fear, in his unwonted excitement he could not altogether regret that the tide must prove too strong for him. He lost sight of what he dreaded—if indeed he sighted it at all—in the hungry contemplation of what he wanted. It was too late now to draw back. At his protesting rational self he shouted, half joyously, half in despair: Too late, too late! And his lips sought and found their desire . . . After a moment of proper maidenly passiveness, Carrie gave him back kiss for kiss. She was not a pretty girl. She was Carrie, commonplace and familiar. It was not she that he wanted (ah, forget that, forget!) but . . . her kisses were fresh and sweet; they, and not she herself, excited him, so that he constrained her out of the chair and put his arms eagerly about her. And as he held her close it suddenly and shockingly flashed into his mind that under this prim woollen frock, under that stiff corsetting, was a warm and naked body. The women of the Seraglio! He was affrighted by his own wickedness, and in hasty reaction from it he released Carrie, and drew away from her, his mind full of shame and doubt and half-formed questions. This crude desire and this honest unexcited affection that existed, not fused in love, but separately and (he feared) alternatingly—could this mean the end of his long aching loneliness?

And now, what was he to say to her. 'Are you . . . all right, Carrie?'

'Yes, dear.' Carrie was affectionate but decisive. 'You're all rumpled. Let me put you to rights.' She stepped up to him, frowning critically, and with busy fingers pulled his collar and tie into their proper shapes. Uneasily submitting to these ministrations, he glanced askance at the wild creature that had stood in his shoes a moment before and delivered him, body and soul, into captivity. But the next moment she had melted again and was saying, snuggling close to him: 'Oh Egg, isn't it nice! I've never had anyone of my very own before. Even . . . even Daddy . . . well, I mean I had to sorta share him, didn't I? But I've got you, haven't I!'

'You bet!' said Egg.

'I've got you all to myself, haven't I!' It was not quite a question, but undoubtedly it demanded an answer.

'Well,' said Egg . . . The orchard blossomed; the moon rose in the summer sky; a black pit gaped to receive him . . . 'Well what do *you* think?' said Egg, pretending to tease her. And lest more questions should come out of it, he again, quickly, covered her mouth with his own. And, say what he might, there was a certain comfort in that. Captivity had, perhaps, its consolations.

'My!' exclaimed Carrie, not without complacency, 'you *are* a one for kissing, I *must* say! No, you must be good for a change!' A thud-thud-thud was heard overhead. 'There's Ma banging away again. Oh, bother her!'

Kissing Carrie, if less than a passion, was something more than a pastime. If it failed to intoxicate him, it at least seldom failed to dull his ears to the whispers that followed him from the past. The next day he contrived many occasions for being alone with her, and she had wit enough not to seem to seek them. Mrs Noom was still ignorant of the dramatic and drastic change in their relationship. Carrie did not lack courage, but she preferred not to provoke the inevitable quarrel until her mother was downstairs again. She had not long to wait, for at tea-time, looking none the worse and none the better for her lying-in-state, Mrs Noom appeared. But during the meal Carrie did not feel equal to announcing that she 'had got a young man', and, after all, as she remarked to the young man himself, good news would keep. 'Won't it, dear!'

Carrie kept her good news until the surprising, the exciting, the utterly unlooked-for visit of Mr Sparks, the aged solicitor of Farringay, who finally introduced himself to Mrs Noom three minutes before closing-time. This was clearly a parlour occasion; so in the cold parlour instead of in the warm kitchen Mr Sparks was received. He seemed —said Carrie afterwards, to Egg—impatient to begin his business, as though, at his time of life, he had no time to spare in merely sociable exchanges. As Carrie was leaving the room he glanced at her over the rim of his spectacles and said, with a touch of asperity: 'I shall want you,

young lady. Miss Noom, I believe? Caroline Noom?'

'That's me,' said Carrie.

The lawyer coughed. 'What I have to say concerns you, as well as your mother.'

'Indeed!' exclaimed Mrs Noom. ('You should have seen the look she give him!' said Carrie.)

'I'll fetch Mr Pandervil then,' remarked Carrie. 'For what concerns me,' she added proudly (if her own account is to be trusted), 'concerns Mr Pandervil too.'

When all three were seated in a row before him, Mr Sparks cleared his throat and remarked coldly, with a slight bow to Mrs Noom: 'The late Mr Richard Noom, a few weeks before his lamented decease, made a will. Of that will I hold a copy in my hand. First of all, Mrs Noom, and, ah, Miss Noom, I must apologize for the fact that these necessary details reach you several days later than they, ah, should have reached you. The fact is, ah, I have been ill in bed, and my subordinates, feeling this to be a matter of some delicacy, did not care to handle it in my, ah, absence. I do not agree with them.' Mr Spark smiled grimly. 'I have, indeed, forcibly expressed myself in a contrary sense.'

There was a pause. Mr Sparks rustled his papers. Mrs Noom spoke.

'Mr Noom made his will years ago. On his wedding day it was. If you tell me he's been and done something behind my back, well I don't believe it, Mr Sparks, lawyer or no lawyer, for a

person has their rights,' said Mrs Noom. 'And their feelings too,' she added, with an ominous sniff.

'Allow me to point out——' began the lawyer.

'Never a cross word in thirty years,' said Mrs Noom.

'Proceeding to the terms of the will,' resumed Mr Sparks, without apparent emotion, 'I shall, if you will permit me, briefly summarize them. The testator gives and bequeaths the whole of his property of whatsoever description to his dearly beloved and only daughter Caroline for her sole use and benefit, *except*,' said Mr Sparks, with a certain sonorous unction, 'except as hereinafter provided. Which is to say, that the said Caroline is straitly charged to succour support and maintain with all due care and in a reasonable state of comfort, well-being and security, Georgina Noom, née Huggins, the dearly beloved wife of the testator . . . That seemed to me,' said Mr Sparks, with a sudden access of cheerfulness, 'to need and require a certain measure of definition. I ventured to advise, therefore, a rather more specific provision, to which, I am happy to say, the testator was persuaded to give legal effect. Here it is.' He stopped to wipe his spectacles on a silk handkerchief. 'Here it is. In the event of the said Georgina Noom electing to share the house and home of the said Caroline Noom the said Georgina Noom is to receive the sum of ten pounds per annum. But in the event of her not so electing the said Georgina Noom is to receive, ah, a some-

what larger sum, to be paid to her by the hands of the testator's solicitors, Messrs Henry Sparks & Company. The sum, in short, of fifty-two pounds per annum. This means, madam, that you have a first charge on the profits of the business, of which your daughter is now the proprietress.'

'Thank you for nothing,' said Mrs Noom.

'Further, it is my duty, I think, to point out to you that it might, in certain circumstances, be to your advantage to leave your daughter's roof. On the other hand . . .'

'Rest easy, Mr Sparks!' Mrs Noom's voice was gall itself. 'I shall stay.' She closed her mouth with a snap. 'And what,' cried Mrs Noom, turning savagely on her daughter, 'what's between you and this young smarty here, Miss Creepy Crawly? Sneaking round your poor Pa and poisoning his innocent mind against his own wife!'

'If you're referring to Mr Pandervil, Ma,' said Carrie, with a toss of the head, 'well, I'm going to marry Mr Pandervil, that's all about it . . . Yes, Ma, I mean it. I'm going to marry Egg and take care of him, and he's going to look after the business for us, and we shall all be as comfy as you please. Shan't we, Egg?'

Egg saw with dismay that Carrie was five years older than the girl he had kissed yesterday, and that the commanding gesture with which she challenged the future might almost have been her mother's.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

CARRIE

I

At eleven o'clock on a Monday morning, some seven years after the death of Mr Noom, there was great excitement in Farringay; but, for all that we know to the contrary, it was almost entirely confined within one breast: that of Mr Farthing, who stood, hands in pockets, pensively jingling his keys and coppers, in the doorway of Noom's Stores. Mr Farthing, whose features now peeped through a forest of black beard, had come to make a small purchase and to pass the time of day with his neighbour Mr Pandervil, but at the moment he was doing neither of these things: with his back to the shop, shutting out the morning sunlight, he stared in a kind of melancholy fever at the work of demolition going on across the street, where workmen, with complete disregard of Mr Farthing's feelings, were destroying that fifty yards of ancient red-brick wall which had given the High Street its peculiar distinction, its character, its onesidedness. The housebreakers worked without haste and without pity, like time itself; they had a long job before them, for there was old Mrs Bartlett's tumbledown cottage as well as this wall to be removed. A stubborn old lady

with a strange whim for dying in the house she had been born in, Mrs Bartlett had for many years opposed modern progress by the simple expedient of not hearing anything that was said to her and by being unable to read or write. But she had at last vacated her cottage—just the place, said Mr Catch, for a nice butcher's shop—and moved into an even humbler lodging in the churchyard; and Squire Oaks—as this more formidable obstacle was still called by the older inhabitants of Farringay—had got himself into financial difficulties from which only the sale of half of his estate could extricate him. The peasant's death and the Squire's fall had been Farringay's great opportunity; and Farringay, in the person of Blogg and Brother, had been quick to see and to seize it. Mr Blogg, as everybody allowed, did a smart deal; he first bought the land from Mr Oaks and the cottage from Mrs Bartlett's heirs, and then, having worked up a tremendous agitation for the broadening of the High Street, generously sold part of what he had bought to the District Council, of which, by a touching coincidence, he happened to be chairman. The land of which Farringay became thus possessed was called 'accommodation land', a phrase that explained, to everybody's satisfaction, why Mr Blogg had been compelled to charge for half his purchase ten times as much as the whole of it had cost him six months before. And now Farringay was to have a splendid High Street, and everybody was rubbing his hands with pleasure in the

prospect, except, among Egg Pandervil's acquaintances, Mr Farthing. For Mr Farthing was a sentimentalist. Useless to talk to him of Farringay's future glory; he was mourning the destruction of her past. Worse than useless to urge upon him that the High Street would be improved out of all knowledge, for that was precisely the kind of improvement which Mr Farthing most bitterly disliked and feared.

And so he stood brooding in the doorway of Egg's shop. 'I don't like the look of that, Mr Pandervil,' he said presently, half turning. 'Not a bit I don't.' Receiving no answer he said: 'What's your way of thinking?'

Egg, from behind his counter, nodded indifferently. 'Seems a pity, p'raps. But if they *will* 'ave it, let 'em! It won't keep *me* awake of nights.'

'It'll be omnibuses next week,' said Mr Farthing bitterly.

'Omnibuses?' exclaimed Mr Pandervil. 'Omnibuses next week! First I've heard of it.'

'Next week or next twelvemonth, it's all one,' said Mr Farthing. 'They'll come, mark my words. *And* soon, what's more.'

With his back to Egg he stood for another five minutes in complete silence. Then he remarked suddenly: 'Well, I mustn't stand here chatting all day!' And he set off down the street.

In ten seconds he was back again. 'Nearly forgot. The missus wants a bit of bundle-wood, Mr Pandervil, if you'll be so obliging.'

'Pleasure, Mr Farthing.'

Mr Pandervil tendered the bundle-wood, and Mr Farthing received and paid for it with a formal courtesy of which each was both conscious and proud. It is in this style, they were both thinking, that buying and selling across the counter should be conducted; subtly, without a word said, they affirmed the dignity of retail trade. And Mr Pandervil, enjoying the piquancy of the moment, shewed a nice discrimination in not saying, as it was on the tip of his tongue to say: 'May I send it for you?' For that would have been overdoing it. An artist knows when to stop.

The transaction over, they were old friends again. 'Well, I'll be bowling my hoop,' said Mr Farthing.

He meant, and was understood to mean, that he was going. With this preliminary the two friends settled down to a little quiet conversation.

'How's the olive-branches, Mr Pandervil? Sprouting and shooting and puttething forth leaves in their season, hey?'

'Mustn't complain,' said Egg. 'Mabe come over queer yesterday, but she's all right again 'smorning. It's my belief she eats too much for a child of her age. Why, when *I* was five . . .' The gleam of false reminiscence visited his eyes, to be extinguished next instant by the cloud of a genuine and recent memory. 'Young Bobbie 'ad quite a bit to say for 'imself last night. Up half the night I was, with bottles and dill-water and I don't know what all.'

Mr Farthing nodded. 'I know. I bin through

it, Mr Pandervil. And shall again, I shouldn't wonder. Well'—he moved reluctantly, a few steps nearer the door—'this won't mend the parson's boots, will it!' He nodded farewell, and stood irresolute.

'It's a dry day, to be sure,' said Mr Farthing presently. 'And I should hate a glass of beer,' he added wistfully.

'Jest a minute, Mr Farthing!' said Egg.

Mr Farthing came back to the counter. 'What! Did I leave me bit of bundle-wood after all!'

'So you did,' Egg laughed nervously. 'I hadn't noticed. Fancy that! There was something I wanted to ask you, Mr Farthing. A sort of a bet it is that I've got on with someone. Now if you saw the word *honourable* front of someone's name, same as it might be "the Honourable John Smith", frinstance. Now what would you say that meant?'

Mr Farthing looked thoughtful. 'Members of Parliament,' he suggested. 'Aren't they honourables?'

'Ah, p'raps you're right!' exclaimed Egg, affecting enlightenment. 'It's of no importance, you know. Just a bit of an argument I had; that's all. One said one thing and one said another. So we sort of bet on it.'

'Jusso,' agreed Mr Farthing. 'Well . . .' He nodded again, and this time the departure was achieved.

Left to himself Mr Pandervil stood for some while resting his hands on the counter and staring at that oblong of blazing brightness, the doorway.

In his shirt-sleeves, and aproned, he looked precisely what he was—a grocer in a small but comfortable way of business. From his appearance and demeanour it could not have been guessed that his father had written a book so learned and so dull that no one had ever been persuaded to publish it, and that he himself in his time had ploughed and sown and reaped a hundred acres and assisted countless labouring sheep to deliver their lambs one stage nearer the slaughter-house; nor could it have been guessed that he was not the king of this particular castle, Noom's Stores, but only the consort of its queen. To all appearance he was an ordinary enough grocer. But his behaviour during the next five minutes was anything but ordinary. First of all, awaking from his dream, he glided quickly to the glass-panelled door of the parlour and peeped in. Satisfied with what he saw, or did not see, he walked across the shop and closed the street door, so shutting out the radiant summer. Finally, he removed the lid from a biscuit tin, and, standing with his back to the window, held this improvised mirror in front of his face and stared with intense and mournful curiosity at the vague reflection it gave back to him. He saw, dimly but indubitably, the lines of resignation that pencilled his forehead, and the russet muttonchop whiskers that altered so oddly the character of his face; and by a queer trick of memory he suddenly recalled that moment—the night Sarah betrothed herself to Mr Twigg, was it twelve years ago, or more?—when he had scrutinized himself in the bedroom

mirror at home, with Algernon watching him perplexedly from the bed.

The shop-bell tinkled. 'Morning, Mr Pandervil!'

He was caught, the lid of the biscuit-tin still in his hand, still raised at a significant angle. 'How d'ye do, Mr Wimmett! All the neighbours coming to see me this morning! Had Mr Farthing here only a minute ago.'

Mr Wimmett eyed his friend in surprise. 'Whad you doing with that thing, Mr Pandervil? Cut yourself with it or suthing?'

'No, not exactly cut myself,' said Egg. 'Do you know, these bits of tin they haven't half got a shine on 'em. Never noticed it before. See, Mr Wimmett—dash me, you can see your face in 'em . . . And what can I do for you this morning?'

Mr Wimmett's manner became curiously hesitating and confidential. His willowy figure stooped towards Egg. 'See here, Mr Pandervil. It's about that letter of yours.'

'Letter?' said Egg.

'Yes. It come this morning right enough. P'raps I was surprised to get it, p'raps I wasn't. I won't say it was what I'd call a neighbourly letter, Mr Pandervil; but I will say that maybe I deserved it.'

Egg was troubled and mystified. 'Got the letter on you, Mr Wimmett?' Mr Wimmett looked astonished. 'Mind if I have a look at it,' said Egg. 'Just to refresh my memory, you know.'

Mr Wimmett found the letter in his pocket. Egg, having read it through, handed it back with an apologetic frown. It was not a neighbourly letter, and it was signed E. Pandervil. Egg had never seen it before.

'Funny thing,' said Egg, after a difficult silence. 'I didn't remember the letter was quite so . . . so strong as that.' A conflict raged within him: to whom was his loyalty due—to himself and his friendship with Wimmett, or to the writer of that letter?

'Well, I must say,' said Mr Wimmett, 'since you've said it yourself, as good as, I must say it don't read to me quite like you, Mr Pandervil. Still I'm not saying I don't deserve it, and if you can be patient a while longer I'll see you get every penny of it, every blessed penny. I tell you what I'll do, what's more,' cried Mr Wimmett, with sudden enthusiasm, 'I'll pay interest on it. Ten per cent. I'll pay. No, twenty per cent. . . .'

Egg interrupted him, for he saw that in the ecstasy of this resolution Mr Wimmett was in danger of regarding the debt as already paid, and of walking out of the shop inflated with a sense of his own generosity. 'We don't want interest, and we won't have it. But we do,' said Egg, remembering Carrie, 'we do want the account paid, and the sooner the better. Fact is,' he added, unable to sustain his asperity, 'Mrs Pandervil doesn't care about giving credit at all. It's always been spot cash in this shop, and that's the best way in my opinion. Pay for what you have *when* you have it,

and then this kind of unpleasantness between neighbours doesn't arise.' Old Mr Noom, could he have heard this speech, would have smiled recognition at it.

'Ah, Mr Pandervil, if I could only lay my hands on a fifty-pound note, I'd never run up another account as long as I lived, I wouldn't.'

'By the way,' said Egg, 'I don't know if you're a man for riddles and problems and general knowledge and suchlike.'

'Pretty middling that way,' said Mr Wimmett.

'Well, I met some folks the other day. No one you know. Nice people too. Well, we got talking, and the question come up: when they call people honourable, what does that mean? Some said this, some said that. In the end, I'm dashed if we didn't have a little bet on it.'

'Honourable?' Mr Wimmett looked as though he didn't quite like the tone of the conversation. 'You're not getting at me, Mr Pandervil? For let me say this, that I didn't come here to be called out of my name. I'm a mild man, Mr Pandervil, and I try to be neighbourly with them as is neighbourly-minded. But if I thought. . . .'

'Bless my soul!' Egg laughed with a boisterousness that would not have deceived a less simple man than Mr Wimmett. 'What bree's biting you now?' he cried, and his tongue took pleasure in remembering that Mershire saying. 'No, no, Mr Wimmett, you're on the wrong track. What I mean is this. Suppose you call somebody, as it might be, the Honourable John Smith, 'what's

the meaning of that? Some said,' added Egg hopefully, 'that it was something to do with a man's father.'

'Dunno,' said Mr Wimmett. 'Lost my poor old father years ago. Give it up. What's the answer.'

'No good asking me,' replied Egg. 'We had a little bet on it. Of course it makes no matter, whatever it means. But you know how folks get talking. Myself, I thought it might be this way. Suppose your father was a lord, Lord Farringay we'll say. Then you'd be the Honourable So-and-So Wimmett. But that's only a guess.'

Mr Wimmett smiled wanly, and repeated the rich fantastic words with the air of trying them on his person: 'The Honourable So-and-So Wimmett! That's a good one, that is! Though I reckon a fifty-pound note'd be more use to me than a high-sounding affair like that. Well, good day, Mr Pandervil.' He paused at the door to inquire, over his shoulder: 'Children well? . . . And *Mrs* P? . . . That's right. Well, good day to you, I'm sure.'

It was not a busy morning, and the few little tasks demanded of him from time to time—a big parcel to be made up for the Vicarage, a pound and a half of best cheese for Mrs Simmons, and seven pounds of preserving sugar for Mrs Blake—did not seriously interrupt his secret train of thought. He could not forget the contrast between what he had seen in the lid of that biscuit-tin with what he had seen in the little, deal-framed mirror on his chest of drawers at home. And a third face

sometimes appeared among his thoughts. Just before noon Mr Wimmett put his head in the doorway, a certain air of triumph colouring the vague hesitancy that was his normal manner. 'Mr Pandervil, you there? Ah, I just looked in to tell you about that puzzle of yours. Went and asked Mr Pummice, I did. I thought he'd know. I said to myself: If there's one man in Farringay as'll know, that man's Mr Pummice.'

Egg waited patiently. 'Well? What did he say?'

'You was right, he says. If I was the Honourable So-and-So Wimmett—that's a good one, that is!—my father would be a lord. Peer of the realm, I think Mr Pummice said. You know what a one he is for his joke. So you'll have won your bet, I reckon?'

Egg nodded and laughed. 'Yes, I s'pose I have.'

But his demeanour, when Mr Wimmett was out of sight, did not suggest that of a man who has won a bet. He looked guiltily round the shop; then began feeling in his waistcoat pocket. But at that point his courage failed him. He hesitated; he heard steps approaching from the house, exasperated steps; and, with a spasm of anxiety passing over his face, he called out: 'All right, Carrie! I'm coming. I'm coming.' There was urgency in his voice. He went into the house at once.

Carrie and Mrs Noom were already seated at the dinner-table, with five-year old Mabel and one-year-old Bobbie within easy reach of them.

Mabel, nearest her grandmother, was a sullen-looking child, and her voice was already edged with the note of complaint. Egg would sometimes mildly reprove her for these ungracious airs, but he was not encouraged to do so. 'Why must you always be *on* at her, Father?' Carrie would say. 'She's not feeling well, poor lamb, issums, ducky?' If, on the other hand, he seemed disposed to take pleasure in his daughter's existence, he was accused of spoiling her. 'She's a pert enough miss already, Father, without you fussing and petting of her. Leave the child alone, do!' He left the child alone; and, if the truth must be told, it was no great hardship to him. Before her birth the prospect of fatherhood had stirred him more to curiosity than to any other feeling, and such pleasure as he had known in anticipation was quickly quenched. The smallness and helplessness of the baby excited compassion in him, but he did not feel towards it any specifically paternal tenderness. Mabel and Bobbie were Carrie's children; it happened that he was their father. Absurd, but it was so. Absurd and unaccountable, and it sometimes profoundly humiliated him to reflect how utterly he had been shaped and bullied by events. Of what he had wished and planned to do, he had done nothing. Instead, he had done a number of involuntary things, acquiring in the process a number of irrelevant possessions, among which were these two children, a shop, and a mother-in-law. Was Carrie herself, then, excluded from this category? That was a question he did not even ask, still less

answer: either because some secret fear, parading in the dress of loyalty, forbade so radical an examination of his heart, or because, having learnt a wisdom of sorts, he was ready, given the slightest encouragement, to exaggerate the compensating advantages of his plight.

'Now Mabe!' said Egg. Haven't you got a hanky?'

Mabel scowled without answering. He repeated his challenge.

'Yes, Father.'

'Then you'd better use it, me dear.'

Bobbie, for no assignable reason, began screaming with rage. 'Diddums wantum din-din den?' murmured Mrs Noom, with a reproachful glance at Egg. She thrust a rubber teat into the child's mouth. Carrie, who sat within hand's reach of Bobbie, so that she could slap him or cuddle him according to her varying mood, fixed the child with a commiserating stare and remarked to the world at large that some people always did have to be interfering. This did not appease Bobbie, who, having skilfully ejected the 'comforter', resumed his screaming. As a screamer Bobbie was an unqualified success. He was thorough; he was a worker. He had, for the time being, adopted screaming as his chief business in life, and by industry and perseverance, his deceased grandfather's favourite virtues, he seemed likely to make that business prosper and pay large dividends. Egg, though he made no voluntary sign, was unable to conceal his discomfort; but the two women, with-

out any further attempt to subdue the screamer, began eating ribs of mutton with an air that told him plainly enough that he had brought it all on himself. He did not rhetorically inquire, either of the women or of himself, what conceivable connection there could be between his daughter's dirty nose—it was still dirty—and his son's fury; experience had taught him the futility of such questions. He sat silent, munching his food; and, when the nuisance became too grievous to be borne any longer, he resorted to a favourite expedient of his, which was to close his eyes and pretend that the noise he heard was that of a steam-engine rushing through a tunnel. In this way, by losing himself in a fantasy of travel, he was able to get just that moment's respite without which, it seemed to him, he must infallibly have gone mad. After five minutes of this intermittent hell Carrie went out of the room to fetch food for its author. When she rose, it became apparent that she was carrying her third child.

There was no conversation during the meal. So much the better, thought Egg. That Carrie was in a disagreeable mood did not greatly surprise or anger him; he was eager indeed to make allowances for her, for there existed in him, deep down and long forgotten, a dumb and utterly irrational gratitude to Carrie that dated from her first bodily surrender to him. 'Put the light out, do! It's a disgrace.' Half furtive and half eager that surrender had been, missing beauty by reason of her conviction of sin, her shame which made him

ashamed, yet touched, in the end, with a hint of frail grace by her awakening compassion for him. She had kissed him warmly, forgivingly. For that he had been grateful; without knowing it, he was grateful still; that gratitude, buried in him but buried alive, moved him to exercise a degree of patience which he himself, had he seen events from the outside, would have found unaccountable. He no longer, unless disturbed, as he was now, by some unwonted excitement, spent any thought on such matters; marriage was become very much a routine affair; but in those early days he had been greatly perplexed, and for a while deeply unhappy. For what was a man to do? After that sorry bridal night it seemed to him only reasonable to suppose that 'all that sort of thing', which Carrie appeared to find degrading and repellent, was at an end between them; but his wife quickly found means to convince him of his mistake. She knew her duty, she loved her husband, and for nothing in the world would she be unkind to him. 'And besides . . .' said Carrie, and hid her face in the pillow. And so she gave him, insisted on giving him, everything of herself except such beauty and candour as might have made the gift a precious one. He never saw her unclothed. It was his privilege to see her with her hair in curlpapers, to watch her—were he so minded—brushing her teeth, and, inadvertently, to surprise her in various inelegant stages of undress; but her body's grace, the body his own had embraced in darkness, was never revealed to him. Once, before the first baby

had been weaned, he entered the bedroom unexpectedly in the middle of the morning, to be greeted with an alarmed cry: 'You mustn't come in now, dear! Go away, do! Baby's having her breakfast.' He reproached himself for his rough country manners: but with only half his heart, for surely, he thought, if things had fallen out differently for me . . .? That conjecture had been too wonderful to be stated even in thought. . . .

'There's the bell, dear!' said Carrie.

'Right-O!' answered Egg. 'I've had all the dinner I want, anyhow.'

He was glad to get back to the shop, where, with less drastic interruption and in a more congenial atmosphere, he could resume his dream, and perhaps, if fortune favoured him, could torture himself once again with a sight—the still astonishing sight—of her name. Mingling with these reflections was a reiteration of his resolve to have it out with Carrie about that Wimmett letter. She didn't ought to have done that; it's going a bit too far, that is, I'm dashed if I don't tell her so. He doubted, nevertheless, whether his indignation would keep warm enough to be worth pouring out upon her; opportunities of private talk were rare indeed in this household, for when the children were not present Mrs Noom was. Bedtime was the only time for talk, and nowadays at bedtime they were so often too sleepy to exchange more than an indifferent word or two. In the first years of their marriage Egg had found the richest of his compensations, the most substantial reward of intimacy,

in the kindly comfort of that lying side by side in the darkness, quietly turning over, in thought and drowsy speech, the day's doings and the morrow's possibilities; and it was by virtue rather of such homely satisfactions than of passion, or of the marriage service permissive of passion, that Carrie was truly his wife, a woman for whom he would have—even while he might be hating her—a unique, an obstinate, a highly inconvenient and exasperating affection.

Of all this he was not aware, except perhaps in a very dim and confused fashion. Such reflections, indeed, would by no means have accorded with his mood, which was, so far as he could make it so, one of resentment and stern resolution. Yes, Carrie should certainly be told about it—making free with his signature like that, and setting his old friends against him! But his heart was not in this punitive enterprise; his heart was in his fingers which, during all that afternoon and evening, when no one was observing them, would be forever moving towards his waistcoat pocket. Nevertheless, when he followed Carrie that night into their bedroom he at once, with the courage of desperation, launched his attack.

'Wimmett came into the shop to-day. About that blessed account of his.'

'Did he pay it?' asked Carrie.

'No. But he promised he would. And look here, Carrie!' Egg's indignation was by now unfeigned; he had vividly remembered Wimmett's crestfallen air. 'Look here, Carrie! You'd no

call to go and write him that letter you did. Tisn't fair on me, either, signing my name to it like that!'

'Oh, you and your Wimmetts,' said Carrie, 'you fair give me the stomach-ache.'

Her tone was less sharp than he had expected it to be. In effect she had accepted his rebuke, and honour was satisfied. He said no more, but glanced at her with a certain curiosity visible in his eyes. She returned his glance, half grinning, with a kind of lazy tolerance which he, from his seven years knowledge of her, took to be a sign that she was pleased with him and with herself. Yet there was a change in her; there was something he did not remember to have seen before, and he was disconcerted by it, for having accepted her as familiar, a book read from cover to cover, he did not wish to be compelled at this time of day to take a new interest in her. At the moment, however, he was busy with other and dearer things.

She came close to him and put a hand on his shoulder. 'You might give us a kiss.'

Astonished to the point of alarm, he did as he was told.

'Something to tell you, Eggie!'

'What is it?' asked Egg.

'Well, I'm getting rid of Ma. That's what it is.'

It was too good to be true, but Egg could not rejoice. 'How do you mean?'

'She's going. Clearing out. Leaving us to ourselves. And about time, too!'

'When did she tell you this?'

Carrie smiled, and Egg could not help thinking that there was cruelty in her smile. 'She didn't. I told *her*.'

'You're never turning her out!' protested Egg.

'Well!' exclaimed Carrie. 'Well, I never did! If you're not the softest-hearted old goose in the world, I never seen one.'

Egg was troubled. 'Whad she say? Make a fuss? And where's she going?'

'Oh, I've found her a place. Nice little place it is, too, and the woman next door'll come in and do for her.'

'*Do* for her?'

'Clean up for her.'

'Well, of course,' said Egg, 'I don't say I'm so anxious to have her about. But it couldn't have been for long, anyhow. Seems hard on an old woman of over seventy to be bundled out of her home like as if she was a bit of furniture. What suddenly put it into your head, Carrie, after all these years? She hasn't been so bad lately, has she?'

'Oh, hasn't she just!' Carrie sniffed, without thereby enhancing her attractiveness. 'If you saw as much of her as I 'ave to, you wouldn't ask what suddenly put it into my head. Put it into my head indeed. It's time you and me was alone a bit, as you'd a bin the first to have said if you'd bin half a man. Put it into my head——'

'All right. All right. She's *your* mother, not mine.' Egg raised his voice to dam the tide of her speech; then lowered it to mumble, inaudibly:

'And you get more like her every minute, you do!' But already his thought had wandered back to its former obsession. 'Going downstairs for a second. Believe I left the shop-door unbolted.'

'Just like you if you did,' said Carrie.

Leaving Carrie with the lighted candle for company he groped his way down the dark stairs and into the shop. He was still fully dressed, and there were matches in his pocket. He lit the lamp. But he did not examine the bolts of the shop-door. He went eagerly to the counter, and taking, at last, that treasure from his waistcoat pocket, he flattened it out with trembling fingers. It was a torn and tiny fragment of newspaper. He stared at it as though it had been the strangest, most precious, most terrible thing in the world. He had utterly forgotten the tremendous piece of news just imparted to him by Carrie. He had utterly forgotten Carrie herself. Yet there was nothing so very remarkable in what he read:

iage has been arranged and will
ke place between Major George William
he Coldstream Guards, eldest son of the Rev.
ildmay, and the Hon. Monica Wrenn, only dau

The paper, besides being crookedly torn, had been rendered all but illegible by contact with something wet and bloody. It was, however, not Egg's life-blood that stained it, but that of a young calf, part of whose liver—a nice tasty piece—Carrie had brought home from her marketing last Saturday.

2

It is probable that Mrs Noom never forgave Carrie for turning her out of the home she had occupied for forty years, and it remained a puzzle to Egg how his wife had had the heart to conceive such a scheme, and how, the resolution made, she had found courage and cunning enough to put it into effect. In a series of discussions that tended to become acrimonious Carrie did her best to enlighten his darkness. She flew into a rage when she discovered, more by chance than by direct questioning, that, though he professed still to hate Mrs Noom for her treatment of the old man, he hated far more bitterly the idea of casting her out. She was old; as a grandmother, though in no other capacity, she was almost benevolent; and she would be lonely in her new cottage, however efficient the ministrations of the woman who was 'to do for her'. And had she not, he inquired, been a great help to Carrie with the children? This, as it proved, was not a fortunate remark, since in Carrie's eyes Mrs Noom's chief offence was that she had tried to come between the children and their mother. 'Knows too much by half, she does!' exclaimed Carrie, with exceeding bitterness. 'What does a girl like me know about rairing children! Oh, nothing, to be sure ! It's her or me goes, Egg Pandervil, so I tell you straight.' Egg had already given up the argument, but Carrie couldn't let it rest. 'What's more I want her bedroom for the gel. When Baby's born we'll have to get a gel,

and she'll have to sleep somewhere. I s'pose . . . But p'raps she could sleep under the counter!' cried Carrie, with angry sarcasm. Egg walked away, closing the door behind him. He knew no other method of silencing Carrie, once she was roused. And it would do her no good, he thought, to get so worked up; for the time of her delivery was now very near.

One can scarcely suppose that during her last six weeks in familiar surroundings Mrs Noom did not suffer considerable anguish of heart, facing, as she was now compelled to do, the prospect of a more drastic change than anything in all her long experience save for her husband's death; yet Egg caught himself wondering whether the pleasures of her situation were not more real to her than its pains. He said as much to Carrie, for every day Mrs Noom's behaviour made it easier for him to feel less sorry for her. Having complained all her life of scorn and neglect, the old woman was now, and for the first time, provided with a genuine grievance, the magnitude of which could scarcely fail, after the first shock of horror, to afford her a certain grim satisfaction. This is conjecture, for into Mrs Noom's private mind Egg was never able to peep; but there can be no question that she threw herself with some relish into the part—so rich in melodramatic quality—that an unkind fate, with Carrie for stage-manager, had now cast her for. She quickly took the stage-management out of her daughter's hands; for even Carrie, well as she knew her mother, could not have known that she had

kept so clean and bright and sharp her talent for persecution. She watered the children with her tears, and set Mabel crying: 'Dear Granny, don't leave Mabe!' The days were measured by her long-suffering sighs; and two nights were dedicated to deathbed scenes less convincing, by many degrees, than the first of that series. Often towards the end of a hearty meal, she would suddenly declare that the food choked her and she daren't touch another crumb; and more than once, at suppertime, she publicly assured the Lord that she would bear her cross without murmuring. She saw to it that no one in the house, the children least of all, forgot that she was under sentence of expulsion. On the axis of poor Granny's patient martyrdom the Pandervil world revolved.

Though it caused him some inevitable discomfort, Egg paid but scant attention to Mrs Noom's behaviour, his mind being, as usual, occupied with more pressing affairs. He had long been a thrall to regret; and now he was acquiring the habit of worry. In particular he was worrying about the expected child. Neither he nor Carrie wanted another child; she was weary of carrying and giving birth, to say nothing of the long sequel of nursing; and he, for his part, shrank from the vicarious suffering these processes entailed for him no less than from the practical nuisance and misery of harassed days and broken nights. He was anxious, too, on Carrie's account, for her last confinement had been a long and grim ordeal: so grim that no amount of patience now, he thought, could ever

'make it up to her'. But there it was; another child was soon to be born; and while he kept saying to himself that after all it couldn't be helped, these things being decided for us by One Above, he yet felt guilty about it, a lout, a clumsy fellow. It made him feel a fool that having got poor Carrie into this plight he could do nothing at all to help her, but must just stand about, anxious and ridiculous, awaiting the issue of events. His friend Farthing, to whom, in an unprecedented moment of confidence, he confessed these feelings, thought him a queer fellow and laughed at his self-reproaches and his fears. 'You'll soon get used to it, Mr Pandervil, my boy! After a while it comes as easy and natural as shelling peas. Wait till you've got your sixth. Then'll be the time to talk about too many.' Mr. Farthing had begotten six.

It pleased Mrs Noom to leave the house just as Carrie's labour was about to begin. 'Fetch the doctor, dear. It's starting,' said Carrie, with pain shewing in her face. 'And,' said Mrs Noom, 'you can fetch me a cab while you're at it, Egg Pandervil. There'll be no room for me in this house now. Come, Carrie, my love, I'll help you to your bed and then I'll go from where I'm not wanted.' Half an hour later, Farringay was scandalized by the spectacle of a white-haired old lady—wonderfully prim and sweet in her best bonnet, black beaded dress, and elastic-sided boots—seated on a large tin trunk in the middle of the road. Such a thing had never happened in the High Street before, and the gossips were soon busy with it. Who

could it be? Why, it was Mrs Noom! Mrs Noom, poor old thing, bundled out of her own house, and waiting, as brave as brave, for the cab to come and take her away. Why, she might be run over, sitting there like that!

But Mrs Noom was not run over. She had chosen her place with some care, and she was far too conspicuous an obstacle to be overlooked by the astonished carters, who, pulling their horses violently to the side of the road, could not forbear asking her what was amiss. She, not ill-disposed for conversation, explained in a gentle voice and with a sad smile that it was nothing, nothing at all; she was only an old widow lady turned out of doors by her daughter. Yes, Mrs Noom she was, of Noom's Stores, and seventy years old as near as made no matter, and her daughter was married to a man named Pandervil, a quiet enough man to look at, and yet—but it wasn't her way to say a word against her own son-be-law, nor she never would. Dabbing her eyes with a tiny handkerchief, she smiled a gallant acknowledgment of all kind inquiries, and she praised the Lord for letting this bad bad business happen on a nice summer day, for if it hadda bin winter she didn't hardly know how she coulda borne it, 'being not so young as I was, and with my poor rheumatics to try me.' Mrs Noom was bounded on the east by an ancient gingham umbrella, which lay in the road with its ferrule pointing accusingly at Noom's Stores, and on the west by her booted feet; and it was impossible for a cart to avoid contact with one or other of these

extremities except by special diligence on the part of its driver.

Egg, meanwhile, was panting along the Binstead road in search of someone who would assist an unwanted child into the world. He had called at Dr Renwick's, and, learning that the doctor was out on his rounds, had left a message. He was sick with anxiety. Had he not taken the precaution of looking in at Farthing's shop, to stammer a word of entreaty to Farthing's missus, he would have been almost in despair. Before he had been running twenty minutes, however, he was overtaken by a tall gentleman riding a boneshaker. The clothes and deportment of this stranger proclaimed him a swell, and he managed his machine with the most elegant skill imaginable. In ordinary circumstances Egg would certainly not have ventured to address this gentleman except across the shop-counter; but he hailed him now, without pausing to calculate the chances of being thought an impudent fellow, and in two breathless sentences explained his urgent need of a doctor. And the velocipedist, having performed the gymnastic feat of dismounting, proved on closer acquaintance to be very pleasant and condescending; for he listened without any sign of being offended, and his free hand twirled his long drooping moustaches —first one, then the other—with an agitation that clearly expressed his sense of the crisis. 'Very well, my man! I shall do the best I can for you.' His best, through no fault of his own, availed Egg nothing; for in twenty-five minutes he returned

with the news that this other doctor, too, was out visiting his patients. 'Deuced anxious time for you.' said the gentleman. 'I can see that.'

Egg's homeward journey was achieved in a series of desperate sprints and accompanied by the sensation of bursting lungs; it was further embittered by his renewed sense of unworthiness, of being, in this practical crisis, good for nothing. He could not get rid of the idea, which in moments of cool intelligence he would have been quick to recognize as preposterous, that he himself was somehow to blame for the fact that these doctors had eluded him. The dismal fact served to emphasize his powerlessness. He could, by inadvertence, beget the child; and that was the beginning and the end of his capacity. This pricking of conscience lacked the definition of thought; for his mind, ill-disposed at any time for the systematic rationalizing of feelings, was now too full of Carrie and her danger to accommodate anything else. He ran headlong into the High Street, and the sight of Mrs Noom sitting on her trunk in the road did not for a moment arrest him. Let the old bitch stay there, he muttered, and almost before his lips had finished moving, his mind released Mrs Noom into oblivion. He found Farthing's missus waiting in the shop to receive him.

He stared at her. 'Doctors all out. How's she going on?'

''Sall right!' said Mrs Farthing, who was forty-five and looked fifty—a lean woman with boot-button eyes. 'Doctor Renwick's with 'er.'

'Doctor Renwick!'

'Came twenty minutes ago. And that person as calls herself a nurse is helping him, or getting in his way. As to that I've my own opinion.'

'Is she . . . bad?'

'Mrs P? Well, it's early to say, isn't it. Bad, yes. Sometimes it's worse and sometimes it's worse still, but it's always bad. I've heard of women having easy times at their lying-ins, but I've never met one. I *'ave* 'eard of unicorns and zebberers, if it comes to that. But there! I didn't ought to be talking this way to a gentleman!' She added that she must get away along back to her shop. 'I sold a pound of candles for you, and here's the money. They said it was right.'

He thanked her warmly, and as soon as she was gone he lapsed into a state of musing. For a while, being assured that the doctor was doing all that could be done, he felt relieved of all responsibility, comparatively carefree. It was true that Carrie was not yet out of danger. Carrie might even die, and —more because he had a profound horror of death than because it meant losing Carrie—he did not want her to die. But just now the idea of her dying was not real or vivid enough to appal him. He stared at it speculatively. In fancy he saw her funeral. His black gloves split in one finger when he put them on. The sweet detestable smell of white lilies assailed him. Carrie's relations, an endless tribe, unctuous, snivelling, black-garbed, filed past him into the room where the coffin was . . . He shook himself out of his evil dream.

But he remembered, too well, Mr Noom's funeral. A nasty sweaty business.

'Mr Pandervil!' Someone had run in from the street. It was Mr Pummice. 'The old lady's gone off!'

'Eh?' Which old lady could that be? Oh, yes. 'Glad to hear it,' said Egg.

Mr Pummice appeared to be profoundly shocked by this remark. His features quivered like the protuberances on a jelly-mould. 'Glad to hear it!'

'Well,' said Egg sheepishly, 'we didn't want her sitting in the road *all* day, did we!' But the sight of his neighbour's extreme perturbation suggested a more sinister interpretation of his phrase. 'Gone off? You said gone off, dint you? You don't mean she's——'

'Gone off in a faint or fit or something,' supplied Mr Pummice. 'Seems to me,' he added severely, as Egg lifted the flap of the counter and hurried forward, 'seems to me it's time you remembered your duty to that poor old lady, Mr Pandervil.' He seized Egg's arm and hurried him into the street.

Another and younger woman was now seated on the tin trunk, and in the lap of this stranger Mrs Noom's head reclined. The rest of her person sprawled shockingly—but not, thought Egg, uncomfortably—on the road. A group of awestruck children and a sprinkling of sympathetic neighbours lent an extra touch of drama to the scene. Egg, taking a sixpenny piece from his pocket, approached the eldest-looking among the children. 'See here, my lad!' said he, and bent to the child's

ear. With his back to the neighbours he could hear the voice of the young woman, excited and compassionate: 'I b'lieve she's coming to!' And he turned round to confirm his astonished guess that this was no stranger after all, but Fanny Hunt; and uncommonly pretty she looked, as he couldn't help noticing, though not so pretty as she had been. Conscious that something was expected of him, he stepped reluctantly into the inner circle of first-aiders. Mr Pummice was at that moment trying to pour a few drops of brandy into the sufferer's mouth. But her teeth were tightly clenched.

'Tight as can be!' exclaimed Mr Pummice, grimacing over his shoulder at Egg. 'Like a vice, upon my word.'

'Try holding her nose a bit,' suggested Egg.

From the indignant murmurs that arose, and from the reproach flashed at him from the pretty hazel eyes of Fanny Hunt, he realised that he had said the wrong thing. Couldn't the noodles *see* that the old woman was shamming?

'Not the man I thought you,' muttered Mr Pummice, yearning tenderly over the recumbent figure of Mrs Noom. 'Not by any manner of means . . . Heartless!' he declared, nuzzling the mouth of his flask against the tight-shut lips of his patient. 'No bowels!' he added, in a somewhat louder voice, chucking her gently under the chin. Despairing of success, he got up and repeated his remark with dreadful distinctness. 'No bowels of compassion, Mr Pandervil!'

There followed a loud silence.

'Can't you *see* she's making game of us?' Egg spoke his thought aloud. 'Fit! Fainting! Does she *look* as if she's fainted? Not her. She's as tough an old party as ever walked, and the craftiest too . . . Hullo, here comes the doctor! Doctor! Doctor Renwick!'

Mrs Noom gave a gasp, opened her eyes, and murmured: 'Where am I?'

'You see?' said Egg. 'As soon as she thinks the doctor's coming, she's as right as a trivet. She thought he was safe out of reach, and so he was, and so he is,' he added excitedly. But he might have saved his breath, for whichever way he turned, there were shocked faces staring at him. 'Come along, Ma!' he said. 'He's a fine doctor, Doctor Renwick is! Just the sound of his name puts you right, don't it?' But the confidence had gone out of him. The weight of public sentiment was too oppressive.

While Fanny Hunt stroked the old woman's head and made maternal noises over her, Mr Pummice, evidently feeling that Farringay waited for a lead from him, stepped forward a pace and cleared his throat nervously. 'The quality of mercy,' he began. Then, abandoning his quotation with the air of a man who drops his sword and resorts to a cudgel, he remarked in a swelling voice: 'As for You, sir! I can only conclude that you have Taken Leave of your Senses.' There was a murmur of applause. 'Please!' he said, raising a deprecating hand. 'Please! . . . Let's carry the the poor old lady into the house.'

Egg, who until this moment had listened with an uneasy grin, suddenly and fatally lost his temper. 'Not into my house, nor my shop neither! Be damned if you shall. Be damned! Be damned!' The little crowd shuddered away from this wicked and violent man. The cab drove up, with Egg's messenger riding triumphantly in it. 'Now then!' said Egg. 'In you go!' He darted towards the prostrate Mrs Noom, pushing aside Pummice who sought to bar his passage. 'You go and make faces at home, Pummice!' He stooped over his mother-in-law; she stared and screamed at him with vexation. The next instant, before anyone could stay him, he was carrying her bodily to the waiting cab. 'In with you!' She was in. He shut the door. 'And a mighty good riddance!' The cab drove off.

Wonderfully refreshed by this release of anger, perhaps heartened by the discovery that he was still capable of resolute and even violent action, he grinned without malice at the backs of his dispersing neighbours; and when he observed that the tin trunk still occupied the middle of the road, it distressed him not at all. The cabman ought to have remembered it; his instructions had been explicit; but it could be sent on later—to-morrow, or next week. And if the old woman lacked a nightdress, she could sleep in her shift.

He dragged the trunk to the door of his shop, from which, just as he reached it, Doctor Renwick was emerging.

The sight of the trunk appeared to surprise the doctor. 'Left it behind, did she! After making

me lug it out of the house for her, the old baggage!' He laughed. 'Did I hear someone out here calling me a few minutes ago?'

'Yes, but it's all right now . . . Is it over?' He scanned the doctor's face and was alarmed by what he seemed to see there.

'Yes, it's over.'

'Do you mean . . . ' Did he mean that Carrie was dead?

'Stillborn, I'm sorry to say. As I feared. Your wife's pulling through pretty well. Shaken up, and she'll be disappointed, of course. But it was a quick delivery.'

Egg found himself wanting to weep: not for the death of an unknown baby, but for the squandered agony, the courage, the dumb endurance. He pictured Carrie lying up there staring at the wall, rather sulky, but with the sulkiness of a child threatened by a storm of tears. His heart tightened. 'Can I go and see her?'

'I've put her to sleep,' said Doctor Renwick. 'But you can go in quietly and have a look at her. She won't wake for an hour or two, I fancy. And . . . by the way, I'll make all the necessary arrangements. See?'

He was gone before Egg could reply.

Egg tiptoed his way into the room. The nurse —that district nurse so despised by Mrs Farthing —shot at him a glance of mournful welcome. He approached the bed and stared down at his wife. She was sleeping peacefully, her lips slightly parted. Tears started to his eyes. She was neither

pretty nor young; but her expression of naive contentment made her seem not only a child, but a child mocked. P'raps it's for the best, he said to himself. After all we didn't really want another, either of us. But the sense of waste and of some fundamental desolation was still quick in him; and, as he slouched out of the room, another picture flashed into his mind, for a moment displacing Carrie. He saw Mrs Noom as—without thought, without understanding—he had seen her less than ten minutes ago. Having fought her last fight and suffered defeat, she sat back in the cab that was to take her into exile. There was a dazed look in her eyes, a bitter twist about her lips . . . And Egg, re-living this moment as he slowly descended the stairs, heaved a sigh that was half sadness and half homage—though what this homage could mean, and to whom it was offered, were questions which, had they entered his mind, he would have been puzzled indeed to answer.

3

During the next few years there was a decided coolness between Mr Pandervil, persecutor of old ladies, and Mr George Pummice, Farringay's literary stationer. Moreover, there was for a while a general feeling that Mr Pandervil had behaved scandalously—first throwing his own mother-in-law into the street, and then, with her at death's door as you might say, taking hold of her like as if she'd a bin a sack of coals and emptying her head

first into that cab. Mr Pummice was voted a hero for the way he had 'stood up' to the wild man; and no one thought the better of Mr Pandervil for having punched and kicked and bitten a gentleman nigh fifteen years older than himself. 'Like a mad dog he was,' declared Fanny Hunt, the post office maiden, whose hatred of Egg was advertised all over Farringay. She never wearied of describing how Mr Pandervil had picked the old woman up and carried her, as easy as easy, to the cab. 'Must be strong as a lion!' she would say, her eyes shining with an excitement that reduced her age by at least five years. And she would add, with a small delicious shudder, that he oughtn't to be at large, it wasn't safe it wasn't. Perhaps, in recent years, life had become just the least bit too safe for Fanny Hunt; she was now on the wrong side of thirty; and it may be that when her fellow-gossip had gone—'Well, Miss Hunt, I wouldn't care to meet a hooligan like *that* in a dark lane!' 'Nor wouldn't I, Mrs Tilly! My word, no! Good day to you!'—it may be that then, alone with her thoughts, she found it possible to modify her hatred of Mr Pandervil and even to half-enjoy her fear of encountering him in a dark lane.

With the help, perhaps of the Farthings, who made it their business to circulate an approximately true version of the story, Farringay soon forgot its disapproval of Egg. Not so Mr Pummice, who continued to turn his head away whenever the culprit came near him. By constant practice these two became adept in the art of avoiding each other, so

that they did not meet again until six years later, on the occasion of the Wimmett sale, at which, to their common discomfort, they found themselves standing side by side. For Wimmett, who had been getting into and out of difficulties all his commercial life, was at last being sold up by his creditors, the chief of whom was represented by a genial and very smartly dressed old gentleman from the metropolis. Mr Wimmett himself, whose career would have been very different if only he had been able to lay his hand on a fifty-pound note from time to time, watched the proceedings dull-eyed from a corner. The sale was being conducted in the drawing room. Near Mr Wimmett was that little brown mouse of a woman, his wife, who, staring round in a bewildered fashion at what with innocent pride she had called her 'best suit of furniture,' and at the knick-knacks on the mantelpiece, the lovely lustres and the imitation-bronze horses and the marble clock that had been Papa's magnificent wedding-present ten years ago, appeared to derive no pleasure from the reflection which must have crossed her mind, that she would never again have the bother of dusting these things and of putting the room to rights. Perhaps she was thinking of her seven children; for her children had been distributed among her comparatively rich relatives, and it was difficult to know when she might hope to see them all under one roof again. And perhaps that fugitive smile, which Egg found it peculiarly difficult to bear, meant that she was already planning the new home—smaller, no doubt, but

cosy and comfortable—which she was to have as soon as Mr Wimmett's ship came to harbour. She could not, however, but have known that Mr Wimmett's ship must be regarded as utterly becalmed unless and until he could lay his hand on . . . in short, until the first condition preliminary to any sort of success had been fulfilled; for it is notorious—and Mr Wimmett made no secret of the fact—that a man can do nothing and get nowhere in this world, nowhere at all, without he has a bit of capital behind him.

'A bad business, this!' remarked Mr Pummice. And lo, it was the insolent, the heartless Pandervil that he found himself addressing. And presently, with embarrassment rather than bitterness, and later with perhaps a twinge of regret for the years wasted in quarrelling, he was engaged in conversation with that ruffian. Both men were nervous of each other, and eagerly polite. Having once spoken they became afraid of silences. Egg talked rather rapidly, and almost at random; and Mr Pummice displayed an exaggerated interest in everything that was said to him, working his face into all manner of strange and eloquent shapes.

'Going . . . going . . . ' The hammer fell. 'Gone!' cried the auctioneer. 'Mr Pummice,' he muttered to the clerk.

'You buying?' said Egg.

'A few pieces,' admitted Mr Pummice.

'They want my brother here,' remarked Egg, after a silence.

'*Do* they now?' Mr Pummice, widening his

eyes, seemed to be fascinated by the suggestion. 'You got a brother, Mr Pandervil, have you? Now I never knew *that* before.'

'Yes, I got a brother all right,' said Egg, affecting a humorous grimness. 'These things *will* 'appen, Mr Pummice. All over the country they're 'appening. Brothers and sisters, sisters and brothers, there's no end to it . . . Hullo, they're off again!'

Mr Pummice was mystified but not silenced. 'Very true, Mr Pandervil. Very true indeed.' He nodded, somewhat furtively, to the auctioneer. 'And so you got a brother, Mr Pandervil. Well I never did!'

'He's older'n me though, my brother is,' said Egg.

'Reelly!' exclaimed Mr Pummice. That Mr Pandervil should have a brother unbeknownst was joy and astonishment enough, but that Mr Pandervil's brother should be older than Mr Pandervil was almost too good to be true. All this was written, clearly if grotesquely, in Mr Pummice's face. 'Really!' It was as if he were saying, in Dickensian phrase: 'Here's richness!'

'My brother Algy,' supplemented Egg, embarrassed by his companion's excess of politeness. 'Why I say they want him here is because he's an auctioneer. And a pretty middling goodish one by all accounts. I reckon if he was here he'd make the figures fly. Yes, fly all up in the air . . . This chap's slow as a week. What's he doing now, frinstance? Ah!'

The resumption of the sale was a relief to Egg, and conceivably it was a relief to Mr Pummice. Both felt that now they could keep silent without suspicion of boorishness or of bearing malice. Egg, defying Carrie and leaving young Mabe to look after the shop for an hour, had had, instead of his dinner, a drink or two—rare indulgence—at the Green Man in company with Farthing and Wimmett: the original band of something better than hope (said Farthing, with a pause for his laugh), needing only that old booby Pummice to make it quite like old times. And here was that old booby Pummice, that master of malice, looking, thought Egg, not nearly so black as the three friends, mournfully conscious of the occasion and glad to keep the conversation running in safe unsentimental channels, had delighted to paint him. Egg, at this moment, felt at once heavy-hearted and hilarious. The Wimmetts' plight had distressed and irritated him; he told himself he mustn't be so soft about other people's troubles; and he was giving generous rein to the reaction. When he recalled that absurd dispute with Pummice in the middle of the High Street, so many years ago, he wanted to laugh aloud and dig his old enemy in the ribs. I should like to pummel Pummice. I should like to pummice Pummel. That audit ale they gave us was strong stuff.

'I beg pardon,' said Mr Pummice.

'I didn't speak, Mr Pummice,' said Egg.

'My mistake, Mr Pandervil.'

The selling up of Wimmett was now proceeding

briskly. It was surprising to see so much furniture in the sale, surprising that so much furniture had ever been paid for. But the Wimmetts had begun in fine style; ten years ago it had been common talk in the village that Wimmett's marriage was making a new man of him, and his own sudden radiance lent colour to the belief. But whatever Wimmett's marriage had done for him, it had not done that, and nothing short of that could have saved him from ultimate ruin. Mr Wimmett was a gull, and it was Mr Wimmett who gulled him. He suffered from an overweening confidence not in himself but in the future, and not in the immediate future, but in a far-off, divine event. Success was certain, but it was always so far away as to be not at the moment worth working for. Instead of working, instead of stocking his shop with numerous small domestic articles that people were constantly and vainly asking him for, he made magnificent plans. Next year, if all went well, he would get the landlord's permission to enlarge the premises, taking in half that bit of garden at the back, and joining the front parlour on to the shop, making, in fact, one large room of it like, by taking the door away or even pulling the wall down. All this was done, in Mr. Wimmett's mind, between breakfast and dinner; and from that time forth he never looked back. The money simply rolled in. And Mrs Wimmett, you may be sure, was as pleased with her wealth, and as proud of her husband, as a woman could well be, and there were no more of those plaintive questions and niggling

unimaginative criticisms which are so tiresome, so unhelpful, to a man engaged in dreaming himself rich. 'But we don't seem to sell the stock we've got, dear, do we? Why do we want room for more?' Doing it all for her, he was, worrying and planning all day long in the hope of decking out his wife in rich grenadine; and this—one can imagine him thinking—was all the thanks he got. The existence of the Wimmett children provoked Mr Farthing to a ribald affectation of surprise. When the first was announced he remarked: 'Never! Not Mr Wimmett! He musta dreamt it!' And he had since been called upon to invent six variants on this little joke.

'Thank you, ladies and gentlemen! And good day to you all!'

The sale was over, and the room was emptying. 'You were telling me, Mr Pandervil, as how you have a brother?'

'Yes.' What a funny fogey the man is, thought Egg. 'Yes, name of Algernon, but we always call him Algy. Wears check suits and sells sheep faster than any other feller in Mercester. Married too, he is, though I got ahead of him there.' He simulated mirth. 'And how have you been keeping, Mr Pummice, after all these years?' Ah, that was silly, that was a mistake; he'll think I'm digging up old scores.

'Pretty so-so,' said Mr Pummice. 'Yes, Mr Pandervil, I mustn't grumble. Business might be better, but it might,' he added portentously, with

a facial contortion that pointed an allusion to the Wimmetts, 'it might be a good deal worse.'

'Ah, yes,' agreed Egg, moving towards the door in the wake of the little crowd. 'I hear you're. . . .'

'Not me,' said Mr Pummice fiercely. 'It's none of my doing. Mrs Pummice—well, I won't deceive you, she's got a kind heart. *And* a spare room, what's more. F'my part, I don't hold with this coddling. I think he deserves all he's got. Yes, Mr Pandervil, every bit of it. And it's not my way to encourage idleness and sleepiness and sloth. Drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags, as the Bard of Avon tells us. And that's a true word.' He linked his arm in Egg's and drew him slowly towards the door. 'If I was a vulgar man, Mr Pandervil, which I hope and trust I never shall be, I should say that Master Dreamy Daniel Wimmett ought to have . . . well, you know what . . . and you know where.'

They were now in the doorway, and the room was empty but for Wimmett and his wife who were wandering aimlessly about, looking at this and that and exchanging a colourless word or two every few moments. Egg called good bye to them in as hearty a voice as he could command. 'You coming along, Mr Pummice?'

Mr Pummice replied with a terrifying grimace and was understood to whisper that he would linger awhile to have a word with these folks.

Egg nodded. 'I'll wait for you.' It seemed to him, in his present abnormal mood, only the neighbourly thing to do, and without curiosity he

watched Mr Pummice join the Wimmetts, take an arm of each, and march them into a corner, muttering savagely the while. What on earth was the old buffer doing? But more surprising than the behaviour of the old buffer was that of Mrs Wimmett, who suddenly, for no apparent reason, seized one of Mr Pummice's hands in both her own and gazed intensely into his face. Her lip quivered and her tears fell. Mr Pummice, shaking himself free, waved his hand airily in the direction of the table. 'That's the one,' he said. 'And those two chairs.' Seeing that her tears still fell he scowled at the marble clock and said: 'That's a bad bargain, I'll wager. Has it ever bin known to tell the time, Mrs Wimmett? Not much more use to you than your precious husband, if you ask me.' Catching at last a front view of Mr Pummice's face, Egg observed that the commotion among his features had reached the dimensions of cataclysm, and that water was running freely in and out of their numerous creases.

Deciding to wait no longer for Mr Pummice, although that gentleman was already edging towards the door, he went into the street and walked slowly homeward. But soon, thinking of all there was to be done, remembering Carrie and Mabe and Bobbie, to say nothing of Harold who was now four and quite old enough to help his brother get into mischief—thinking of these numerous responsibilities, from which for an hour or more he had been absent both in spirit and in person, he was seized with that fever of anxiety which

nowadays was almost his normal condition. He quickened his pace, conscience accusing him of grossly neglecting his duties as husband and father. Was not the Wimmetts' example a terrible warning to him! For many years now—since the hour of his wedding, to be precise—conscience had always in his thoughts worn Carrie's face and spoken in Carrie's sharp sarcastic tones; and by means of this device it had acquired a tyrannical power over him, so that nowhere, not even in his secret mind, could he be sure of a moment's peace. The income from the business could not keep pace with the needs of his growing family. There were now two rival grocers in the High Street, which was become an important thoroughfare; and several others held commanding positions on the outskirts of what was now called Old Farringay, or 'the village', to distinguish it from the large scattered suburb of which it was the centre. These supplied the large new residences and the rows of doubled-fronted villas, and Egg could not successfully compete with them. And so many of his best customers, while resisting the blandishments of these upstart grocers, got into the unpatriotic habit of taking tram to the city once a week—it could be done in fifty minutes with good horses and not too many stops—and doing there the greater part of their shopping. He had cares more personal and less definable than these, but these certainly helped to make him look and feel, at forty, a good deal older than his years.

Immersed in such thoughts, he noticed, without

the interest it might otherwise have aroused in him, that a carriage was drawn up outside Noom's Stores, from the door-way of which, with himself within five yards of it, a stranger emerged, a woman broadbrowed, full bosomed, and evidently in the prime of a radiant maturity. Her eyes wore a pensive look; and her mouth, grave and sweet, seemed to express an habitual kindness. She stepped, not proudly but with a patrician grace of movement, into the waiting carriage. Egg could see at a glance that she was 'a real lady', and not of Farringay. At his second glance his heart stood still. He stared in wonder and in a kind of terror . . . and he shuddered with relief, though feeling sick and dazed, when the enchantment that paralyzed him was snapped by the coachman's word to his horse, the gathered reins, the moving wheels. With a sense of escape he turned into the shop, where he found Carrie busy behind the counter.

At his entry Carrie looked up. She eyed him sharply. 'Lady asking bout you. Didjou see 'er?'

'Lady? What lady?'

'Her as jest went out of the shop. Must have run into her almost. In a kerridge she was.'

Egg considered. 'I *did* see a lady in a carriage,' he admitted judicially. 'What of it?'

'Ever seen her before?'

'Not me,' said Egg.

'She knows *you* anyhow. Seems she was a friend of yours when you was a lad with your father.'

'How's that?' Egg busied himself, unneces-

sarily, in moving bottles of pickle from one shelf to another. 'Who might she 'ave bin, I wonder?'

'Ask me another,' said Carrie. 'Just passing, she said she was. Just happened to see the name. Such an uncommon name. Oh, very la-di-dah she was, *I* can tell you!' sneered Carrie. 'Wanted to know was you the Mr Pandervil that useta be farming out at Mershire, when she was a girl staying at the Vicarage.'

'And what did you say to that?' inquired Egg, with his back towards her. He waited, in an ecstasy of apprehension, for the answer. No answer. 'What did you say to her, Carrie, when she arst that?' he said, turning round.

'Thank you,' said Carrie grimly. 'I never did care about talking to a man's backside. Well if you want to know, I sent her about her business. As good as.' She met his stare defiantly. 'I said there musta bin some mistake, and was there anything more to-day, ma'am? That's what I said.' After a bitter silence she added explosively: 'I don't want any of your swell ladies here, so I tell you straight.'

At that moment he hated Carrie. He could have wished her dead, save that, before such a wish could take shape, his despised 'softness' would have intervened against it. He hated Carrie, and he hated all the drab litter, the humiliating tangle of circumstances, that she symbolized for him. Yes, glad though he was that this visitor from another world would never come to torture him again, he believed that he would never forgive Carrie for

the words she had just uttered. It's all along of that new name, he thought; if we hadn't a changed the name this wouldn't a happened. And he remembered the day—soon after Mrs Noom's expulsion—when Carrie, excited as a young girl, had led him out of the shop to show him the innovation she had secretly, and with immense ingenuity, contrived as a 'surprise' for him:

E. Pandervil
late
Noom

Formerly the name of Noom had stood alone, and for the good of the business it must never be removed. But now, 'with Ma gorn', Carrie and Egg Pandervil were verily in possession at last. . . . Remembering that moment and her naive pleasure in it, he could not—ungenerous and unlovely though she was—hate her with an undivided heart.

4

Nevertheless he was conscious now of a deeper estrangement than anything that had divided him from Carrie before. Where there had been division indeed, but division superficially bridged by the words and gestures of routine affection, there was now, as it seemed to Egg, an impassable gulf of bitterness. For many days not only was he a prey to wretchedness, haggard with the savouring of an old grief and a new disgust, but

—I don't care if she sees it, he said to himself savagely; half a mind to have it out with her, I am; chaining me up like as if I was a dog! He half-decided that he would leave Carrie and her children for ever, and live the rest of his life as a farm-labourer in some remote Mershire village; the idea visited him in a series of idyllic pictures, and his manner with customers became noticeably absentminded. He tried to imagine what life would be like were it spent in the company of that bewitching stranger, that lovely lady who had once been his Monica; and, snatched up into a fool's paradise utterly and gloriously remote from reality, he would say to himself, Perhaps even now . . . only to remember, the next instant, what and where he was: a grocer, middle-aged, ridiculous, not over prosperous, and the father of three children. More than ever before he felt spiritually homeless. He had shut himself, willingly, out of Carrie's country; and no magic existed by whose virtue he could re-possess his own.

But the notion of escaping did not die so easily. He began to make mental lists of the things he would need to take. As for Carrie, she had the shop. It had been her shop always, and, though—as he now recalled with surprise—she had not been over-quick to remind him of her proprietorship in that matter, he had never spent more on himself than the wages of an ill-paid manager would have amounted to. Moreover he had, as a grocer, justified Carrie's confidence in him; for when it was

discovered that Mr Noom had left trade debts behind him as well as benevolent intentions, it was Egg's energy, to say nothing of sixty-three pounds ten which had been his share of the late Mrs Pandervil's estate, that saved the situation. That things had gone somewhat awry in recent years was none of his doing, he reflected. And now, let Carrie get on with it! She would manage, somehow. He would go to-morrow, or the day after to-morrow at the latest.

With this resolve in his mind he mounted the stairs and entered the shared bedroom. Carrie, half undressed, was putting her hair into curl-papers. He saw at once that she had been weeping, and his foolish heart betrayed him into asking: 'What's up?'

She wouldn't look at him. 'Caught again, that's all. Fat lot you care!'

'When did you know?' he asked. 'Are you sure.'

'Days and days . . . Yes, pretty sure.'

He cursed quietly, angry and compassionate. After a moment's silent brooding, while his fingers removed collar and tie, he remarked: 'Well, it had better be the last, if you ask me. I don't know what *you* think.'

A more friendly note sounded in Carrie's reply. 'Just what I was going to say. I've had about enough of it. At *my* age too!'

'Tell you what,' said Egg. He had forgotten that he would be leaving Carrie to-morrow, or the next day at latest. 'Tell you what . . . we'll see

it doesn't happen again.' His voice was so eager that he might have been proposing marriage instead of, in effect, a kind of divorce.

'How d'you mean?' said Carrie, frowning at him.

'Won't give it a chance. Won't risk it, see?' He was confused, being still afraid of shocking that famous modesty of hers.

Carrie, however, was no longer the timid bride. She understood his meaning and faced it. 'I didn't mean *that*,' she said. 'I didn't mean *that*. Might as well not be married at all.' She was silent for a while. 'There's other ways. Somebody was saying the other day . . . I met somebody who told me—never mind who it was. . . .' She tried again: 'It seems there's some new medicine out now. Almost certain it is, the person said that told me. So p'raps,' ended Carrie cheerfully, 'p'raps Harold'll be the last, after all. Three's plenty in a house this size.'

Egg looked gloomy. 'Don't much like the sound of that, Carrie. You better be careful with yourself.' And he made up his mind to do all he could dissuade her from the use of unknown and unauthorized 'medicines'. He was anxious about her, and the impending crisis of childbirth made him forget that he hated her. To-night she seemed to have lost something of her customary hard assurance, and when he blew the candle out and got into bed she crept up close to him, as if for protection. He kissed her cheek, and, because he felt guilty for not loving her, he gave her a

second and a warmer kiss before turning over to settle down to sleep. He fell into drowsy reflectiveness. When he looked back over the years of his marriage he found it easy to persuade himself that Carrie had once been kind and charming, and that he had loved her. It had always been so. From the bridal night itself, when had been contracted that mysterious debt of which he could have given no rational account, he had suffered the Carrie that now was for the sake of a Carrie that he pretended had once been. Despite her sharp tongue, her managing ways, her personal unattractiveness, he could not altogether ignore in himself a feeling of being tied to Carrie by something other than law and custom. Perhaps he encouraged the feeling; perhaps—who knows?—he half-wittingly induced it; and if ever he had asked himself why, it was to this arcady of the imagination, this period of mutual kindness and delight, that the answer would have pointed. And so, in requital of a past that he had never in fact experienced, he surrendered the future once more into her hands—a future for which, after all, he had now no other use.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

FATHER AND SON

I

But if Egg thought that life held no more surprises for him, he was mistaken. At the age of forty-seven he found himself singing a somewhat sketchy bass in the choir of the Ebenezer Chapel. He was confessedly no musician, but the Reverend Shadrach Pierce welcomed him none the less heartily for that. 'The harvest truly is plenteous,' said Mr Pierce, 'but the labourers are few. And the Lord,' he added solemnly, 'listeneth not to the voice of man but readeth the secret heart.' To Egg that seemed a very good argument for his staying at home on Sunday to muddle through his accounts, instead of importuning the Lord with a service of song to which He would not listen; but he had a reluctant respect for the Reverend Shadrach Pierce, and was pleased, perhaps a little flattered, by his attentions. 'One of our leading citizens, Mr Pandervil,' said the pastor. 'Think of the value of the example to our district.' It had once been 'our village'; it became 'our town'; it was now definitely 'our district'. The High Street, itself now half a mile long, was linked more intimately than ever with its parent city, London; and Farringay contributed a street-acci-

dent nearly every week to the annals of progress. 'Yes, Mr Pandervil, the Lord is knocking at the door of your heart. Won't you let Him in?' Despite the pastor's wistful woeful look, Egg found in himself no response to this particular appeal: it was the kind of talk he didn't understand. The choir, sociability, an atmosphere of hearty friendship—this he understood better.

Mr Pierce was a youngish man with a great mane of brown hair, eagle eyes, and a voice like an American organ. Egg's friend Farthing didn't, he said, care for the fellow's look. 'Actressy!' said Mr Farthing. 'Besides, there's too much of him. Arms and legs like an octopus. Wants taking in a tuck or two, does your Reverend Pierce.' But by his own denominationalists Mr Pierce was considered to be a great Force for Righteousness; and there could be no disputing that he had 'got on'. He was militant in his Dissent. Instead of being content, as his predecessors had been, with a congregation of sixty or seventy redeemed souls, he went into the highways and hedges and compelled alien religionists to come in. By sensational preaching, and by visiting the tents of the ungodly as well as those of the faithful, he filled his little chapel to bursting-point. Carrie Pandervil, who for years had been ailing and peevish, found great satisfaction in the flash of his eyes, the deep rich drawl of his voice, and the dexterity with which he supplied a spiritual lesson for her every need. He persuaded her to come and hear him preach a sanguinary sermon on 'The Blood of Christ cleans-

eth us from all sin'; she listened with absorbed, gluttonous, hot-eyed attention; and so she was won for the Lord from the vain pomp and worldly ambitions and wicked papist ritual of the Church of England. Egg, as we have seen, was won by other means. He did not positively like the Reverend Shadrach; and, though he had become lax in church attendance (greatly to the scandal of his neighbours), he still cherished sentimental memories of Keyborough Parish Church. But these dissenting folk were such hearty handshakers, and made so much of a man who looked in for a Sunday or two out of mere curiosity, that it was difficult to rebuff them; and young Mr Pierce himself was so touchingly confident of always getting his own way that Egg had not the heart to disappoint him. Before he quite knew where he was, he had 'joined the church', a ceremony that reached its triumphant conclusion in a series of questions and answers, after this fashion:

'As I understand you, Mr Pandervil, you have expressed a spontaneous desire to enter the Lord's communion?'

'Er . . . that's right!' agreed Egg cheerfully.

'And you would wish me, his unworthy servant, to extend to you the Right Hand of Fellowship at our next divine service?'

'That's right!' said Egg again. 'Whatever's usual.'

'Mr Pandervil,' said the Pastor, 'this is a wonderful moment. There is great rejoicing in heaven at this moment. Hark!' Mr Pierce raised his

hands and eyes to the ceiling. 'Hark! I can almost hear the singing of the heavenly host, Mr Pandervil.' He gazed tenderly at his convert. 'Come let us thank the Lord together, for that he hath dealt mercifully with one who has been a great sinner.'

'Oh, I don't know about that,' said Egg modestly. 'Not really much in the great sinner line, you know.'

'Let us pray!' intoned the reverend gentleman, sliding round into a kneeling posture and propping his elbows on the chair he had just vacated. 'Let us pray, brother!'

'Oh, right you are!' said Egg, with cheerful alacrity. He hoped by this demeanour to conceal his momentary surprise and dismay. He was disappointed to find in himself nothing that responded to Mr Pierce's mood. He had experienced—perhaps half-a-dozen times in his life—moments of a rare strangeness and beauty: high impersonal moments touched with a degree of wonder that made him feel as though great music were being wrought in him. But the sight of Mr Pierce burrowing into his chair like a rabbit, the sight of Mr Pierce's black-trousered legs propped up on the toes of his large-booted feet—this did not recall those moments. Mr Pierce, an accredited agent of heaven, was addressing the Lord in prayer; and Egg, whose thoughts had broken beyond all decent control, could do nothing but hope that the Lord would not notice how extremely comical he and the parson, nosing the seats of their

chairs, must look. He became hot with a confusion of shame and reverence. He tried to echo in his own heart the prayer that was being said for him. And when it was over he remained kneeling for some moments out of sheer self-consciousness.

So it was that Egg Pandervil became a member of Ebenezer Chapel and a voice in Ebenezer choir. If he did not sing bass, he at least sang something that was not treble, not alto, and not tenor. He could master a simple tune without much trouble. After a month or two among the Ebenezerites he could (but would not) have sung you the air of any one of his dozen favourite hymns. But it was just the air that he must not sing; for him, a low baritone, there was more subtle work to be done. Having no sense of harmony he was hard put to it to hold his own against the three rival parts—especially the dangerous top-part—going on around him; and the musical score did not help him much, though he understood that here you must go up a bit and there you must go down, and that at the end of the verse you wait, if necessary, for the others to catch up with you. His brother-basses, though a feeble lot, were on the whole more help than the music. When he lost touch with them, it seemed safest to stick to two notes, or even, at a pinch, to groan his way through a whole hymn on one alone, provided that one was well-chosen—a low note, and not too loud.

After these vocal exercises he found it easier and pleasanter to spin his private reveries than to follow the Reverend Shadrach Pierce on his racket-

ing expeditions to hell and back. The fate of the wicked was the preacher's constant theme, and he eked out his shreds and tatters of doctrine with a gorgeous patchwork of histrionics. By way of illustration he one day pretended that his pulpit was a red-hot cage, and in trying to escape from it he burnt his hands so often and so convincingly that Egg could almost smell the roasting flesh. 'And that,' said Mr Pierce, 'will be the fate of the wicked—the idolater, the fornicator, the unbeliever—not for an hour, not for a day, not for a week, not for a month, not for a year—nay, not for a century only, but for all eternity!' It was dismal hearing, but Egg took it very little to heart, perhaps because he had never encountered any of these 'wicked' people of whom just lately he was hearing such sad accounts. He couldn't imagine any of the simple sinners of his acquaintance falling into that category or provoking such anger on the part of their Maker. No confessed unbeliever had ever come his way; not one of his neighbours had been caught bowing down to idols; and as for 'the fornicator', Egg had no precise notion of what the word meant, though he knew it to mean something unspeakable, bizarre, and utterly remote from ordinary experience. No doubt, in his mild way, he believed in hell, for he was none of your atheists; but he thought of hell as permanently empty—except perhaps for a devil or two by way of staff—empty and existing only as a warning to doubters and other desperadoes. He spent little time on this branch of theology, a science in which,

as we see, he had made no perceptible progress since boyhood. More often he thought of heaven, of family gatherings after death where he would find brother Willy, straight and smart in his red coat and grinning with happiness; and Mother, pouring out tea for everybody; and Father, still absent from them in mind, still looking wistfully for something beyond the horizon; and Algernon and all the sisters. Yes, and others would be there, others who even in heaven couldn't be fitted into any plausible scheme. Heaven would be better than nothing, but it would fall very short of his heart's desire.

At other times—for the tedium of the sermon had to be avoided somehow—he let his fancy stray as far as the Lord God himself. He thought of God as an old man, scholarly, gentle, and preoccupied—a man, indeed rather like his own father. Pictures of God's life in heaven floated to him unbidden and uncensored upon the tide of Mr Pierce's disregarded eloquence. God, in this fantasy of Egg's, spent his eternal day wandering about a large room lined with books, a rather stuffy room smelling of leather; wandering up and down, peering over his spectacles at this title or at that, taking down a book here, a book there, and at last, the choice made, sitting at the table with it to read it from end to end. It was Egg's old Sunday game, this fantasy, and it repeated itself, with variations, week after week. And one day, out of nowhere, there came the odd thought that these thousands of books were simply the lives of all the people in

the world, and that God was their author. Why does he read them, asked Egg, if he wrote them all himself? P'raps he's got a bad memory. I wonder what he thinks of us all? . . . But of course it was only fancy. God wasn't really like that at all. God was really—'Let us conclude the morning's worship by singing together Hymn Number . . .' The responsibility of being in the choir made it impossible for Egg to come to any definite conclusion about the true nature of God.

All things considered, the Ebenezer Chapel could certainly be counted among the pleasures of his life. And, if it did nothing else, it provided him with a sanctuary from Carrie. During that blessed hour-and-a-half every Sunday morning and evening, Carrie could not call out to him (in a voice so like her mother's!): 'Eggie dear! I'm in dreadful pain. But of course you don't care whether I live or die.' In chapel he was immune from this persecution; and Carrie, sitting in a pew with Mabe and Bobby and Harold, forgot her own sufferings in the enjoyment of her Saviour's. Mabe was now 'quite the young woman'; Bobby was fifteen and a winner of scholarships; Harold was ten and suety. Their mother took pride in them, if only the pride of possession; but their father continued to catch himself, in moments of unwariness, wondering why he had begotten them. He couldn't recall having wanted a wife, still less a family; yet here he was, amply provided with both. It's queer, the way things happen, he said to himself. Very queer it is. Now who'd a thought . . . ?

Egg was a chorister of twelve months' standing, and very much at home with the brethren though still shy of their peculiar religious idiom, when a fourth child was born to him. The affair was so ridiculous as to be almost a scandal; and it was just like Egg, said Carrie bitterly, to get her another at *her* age. For nearly ten years she had been 'lucky', and now, when a body might have supposed all danger past, she was 'caught'. The child was a boy, and they decided to call him Nicholas.

'Why Nicholas?' demanded old Mrs Noom, to whom Egg had been bidden carry the news.

'Why not Nicholas?' retorted Egg.

'Nicholas Noom or Nicholas Huggins?' asked she.

'Neither,' said Egg. 'Nicholas Pandervil. That's all. Now keep your hair on, Ma! You've had your turn. You've had it twice, as I see things. There's Mabel Noom Pandervil, and there's Robert Huggins Pandervil, and there's Harold Richard, called after his poor grandpa.'

'Nicholas!' Mrs Noom had lost all her teeth but one, and this last survivor lent a certain imbecile emphasis to her sneers. 'I never heard of such a name. But bless my soul, Egg Pandervil, the poor mite must be named *after* someone! You woont 'ave 'im a heathen, would you?' She brooded in silence for a while; then broke into grumbling speech again. 'Nicholas! There's never bin no Nicholas in our family, that I *will* say. And if I can't speak my mind to my own son-be-law, things 'ave come to a pretty pickle. Nicho-

las!—why, Old Nick 'imself is the only one *I* knows of.' She giggled, baring her one fang again. 'Hark at me!' she said, self-admiringly, with shrill laughter. '*Swearing* I am, and me a granny four times over!'

Nicholas began life as a puny child, and his mother had a grudge against him. She had contracted a permanent ill-temper which obliged her to take to her bed a week after her recovery from the effects of the confinement. And once back in bed she gave every sign of intending to stay there, doing unto others as she—in her own mother's reign—had 'been done by', filling the house not with the sound but with the nervous expectancy of dramatic crisis and lamentation. She would call in a weary singsong tone to husband or to daughter, and, when one of them came to find out what she wanted, she would smile sourly and give this respondent a piece of her mind. It was not, we must hope, a large piece; for there was kindness and courage somewhere dormant in her, and Egg had seen flashes of both, though not so many as he chose both privately and publicly to pretend. Ah, she knew she was a nuisance, she would say, and she prayed that God would forgive them for wishing to be rid of her, for it was only natural, but meanwhile, if she could have a little food sometimes, it would help her to bear up. You're more like your Ma every day, thought Egg—not for the first time, nor yet for the second. And he could hardly be blamed for feeling that young Nicky, the cause of this last manifestation, had put

in a most untimely appearance. Nor did the child make any visible effort to get himself beloved. He cried a great deal; and with Carrie so tiresome, and Mabe gluttonous of sleep after drudging in house and shop all day, the burden of getting out of bed two or three times a night, to feed the baby or rock the baby or carry the baby up and down the room, fell upon Egg's shoulders. The more of these attentions Nicky got, the more regularly and confidently did he demand them; and as time went on, Egg found himself becoming quite unexpectedly and preposterously fond of his torturer. When Nicky reached the age of two it became evident to a discerning eye that he was a Pandervil, the first in this family. One day that comical knob in the middle of his tiny face would become a straight, small, delicately shaped, Pandervil nose. He's going to be like Father to look at, thought Egg; and the flame of vicarious ambition kindled in him. Perhaps the boy would be brainy like Father, too; a scholar, a reader of books. Egg derided himself for daring to entertain such ill-founded hopes. What chance had the son of a struggling grocer!

From bitterness such as this the Ebenezer Chapel was something of a refuge, and for that reason he was shy of anything that might seem to imperil his position as a respected chapel-going citizen. This makes it all the more surprising that he should have behaved as he did to the glossy gentleman who kindly came down from London with the most generous proposals to him. He appeared,

this glossy gentleman, on the morning following a particularly disturbed and unhappy night; and he was received in the parlour, while Mabe attended to customers. He was the most radiant person Egg had ever seen. His boots sparkled; his eyes glinted behind gold-rimmed pince-nez; his teeth flashed goldenly; and his speech was like honey from the honeycomb.

'I see,' said Egg. 'If you'll excuse me a minute I'll just have a word with my wife about it. But I'm sure she'll say no, same as I do.'

'That would be very misguided policy,' returned the glossy gentleman, staring tenderly at the crease in his trousers. 'If I might suggest, as a friend. . . .'

Egg did not much like his visitor. 'I won't keep you more than a minute,' he said. And in very little more than a minute he was back reiterating his decision not to sell Pandervil's Stores to the large and important firm represented by the glossy gentleman.

'You won't even consider the matter?' The glossy gentleman couldn't believe his ears. 'Let me persuade you.' Egg shook his head, and moved suggestively towards the door. 'I could mention a figure that would interest you.'

Egg led the way back into the shop, where his visitor was forced to follow him. 'No figures would interest me. Thanks all the same.'

'Then I shall be put to a great deal of trouble,' murmured the glossy gentleman, in a sad, insinuating tone. 'Do you know what I shall do, Mr

Pennyvil? I shall take a note of all your prices. At whatever sacrifice I shall procure other and better premises uncomfortably near to you. And I shall undercut you. We are a very big organization, and we can afford to lose money for ten years. Does that amuse you, Mr Pennyvil?'

Egg stared in surprise at the smiling face that so blandly interrogated him. The meaning of what was being said to him slowly cohered in his mind. And then he experienced, for the third time in this history, one of those rare moments of release from his world of diffidence and hesitancy into a kind of madness.

'And I tell you what *I'll* do, mister,' he said, in rising tones. 'I tell you what *I'll* do.' he repeated excitedly. His eyes were blazing, his fists clenched. 'I'll PUNCH YOU ON THE NOSE!'

He punched, and punched mightily, feeling that he was somehow, by this violence, taking a sort of revenge on all the circumstances that had tricked and trapped him into becoming what he was become. The glossy gentleman roared and backed away; his pince-nez clattered to the floor. Then Egg's brain cleared; the mists rolled away; and he perceived that he had behaved in a ridiculous, an undignified, indeed a criminal way. He was suddenly ashamed. Yet in the midst of this shame he recalled, with exultation, that absurd battle-cry: I'll punch you on the nose. And for the life of him he couldn't help grinning. But the grave face of Mr Farthing checked his mirth. How long had Farthing been in the shop?

'You saw!' spluttered the glossy gentleman. 'I claim you as a witness.'

'Yes, sir.' Farthing was surprisingly ready to oblige. 'I saw everything. I saw this man here punch you on the nose. And a right hard punch it was, if I'm any judge.'

'I shall charge him,' said the stranger. 'You saw everything. You saw everything. You're my witness.'

'I saw everything,' agreed Farthing, 'and I heard everything. If you'll come across the road with me, sir, my missus will mop you up a bit. My, that was a good hard punch, that was. A dangerous fellow, to be sure!'

For days Egg was haunted by one recurrent fear: I shall have to leave the choir. They'll never want to speak to me again, those chapel folk. And he wondered if the Reverend Shadrach Pierce, when he had referred to him as 'a great sinner', had had in mind some highly coloured account of how, many years ago, he had flung his aged mother-in-law into a cab . . . And in due time he appeared in court to answer for his misdemeanour. In the witness-box Mr Farthing, that grey-haired respectable tradesman, claimed to have seen everything. He knew the defendant well, but would rather not say whether or not he had always been on friendly terms with him. Pressed on this point, he admitted that he had had words with defendant on the very morning of the alleged assault, but insisted that he was not prejudiced.

'Now let us get this clear, Mr Farthing. Are we to understand that you saw the encounter between defendant and plaintiff? That you were present throughout the proceedings?'

'Yes.'

'The defendant pleads gross provocation. Did you see anything that could properly be so described?'

'Well, sir . . .' Mr Farthing shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, it don't amount to anything.'

Mr Farthing was sternly asked what he meant.

'If I was to say,' said Mr Farthing, 'if I was to say as the gentleman *hit* Mr Pandervil first, I would be telling you a lie. For hitting and kicking are two very different things, aren't they now? And I'm not saying that Mr Pandervil didn't deserve to be kicked. And I'm not saying. . . .'

Did witness assert that he saw the plaintiff kick the defendant? Yes. And was this kick delivered before the defendant's alleged assault on the plaintiff? Yes. Would witness, remembering that he was on oath, describe this kick more exactly?

'It was what I should call,' said Mr Farthing reluctantly, 'a kick on the behind. But I wouldn't call it provocation. Not for a punch like that, I wouldn't.'

And so justice was betrayed; Mr Farthing was perjured; and Mr Pandervil retained his office in the Ebenezer choir.

2

Of the sixteen perspiring mortals crammed into that inadequate parlour and overflowing into the kichen beyond, Bob Pandervil alone—young Bobby, grown older, and self-shorn of his tender and belittling suffix—seemed unaffected by the general excitement. It was his twenty-first birthday party, and everybody else was preparing to make the best of it. Those of the guests for whom chairs had been found were selfconsciously sitting in them; the rest were lined up against the walls trying to look as though they preferred standing. Between these two parties there was a constant exchange of polite offers and friendly chaff. 'Do come an' 'ave a bit of a sit-down, Daniel. Ern'll make room for you, won't you, Ern?' 'Mustn't sit down, Aunty Min. Fraid of losing me appetite.' There was general laughter at this, the more hearty because Daniel Finch, Mabe's middle-aged fishmonger husband, was not a man much given to jocularity. He was lean, cadaverous, morose; he had a habit of eyeing women with an emphasis that was apt to give offence; no one but Mabe knew, though more than one guessed, why Mabe had ever consented to marry him; and in Egg's eyes he was an unqualified disaster. Next to Daniel Finch stood Mabe herself, stubbornly refusing a chair, and saying at intervals to chosen auditors: 'Remember *my* twenty-first birthday party, Aunty Min? What, you don't! Well, that aint surprising, after all, seeing I never 'ad none.'

Aunty Min, sometimes called Algernon's Min, was a spare, spry, darkish woman nearing sixty, whom nature had apparently designed as a foil to Algernon's rosy corpulence. She could not rest long in her seat, but must be for ever darting to and fro, lending a hand here and having a word there, and passing the time of day with fellow-revellers so distant, and so decidedly cut off from her, as to have been inaccessible to a woman less nimble of body or less resolute in geniality. She was childless, and by that fact disappointed; but her inextinguishable cheerfulness—a thing so unwarranted, so absurd, that people couldn't but laugh when they encountered it—made her a general favourite. Already, fifteen minutes after her arrival at the party, she was being called 'Aunty Min' by all the young men present, among whom were Ern Farthing and smart Alf Catch.

'It's going to be a very brisk little party,' said Uncle Algy approvingly. 'I can see that. What do *you* say, Mr Farthing, sir? A very brisk little party, hey? Same as my wife here—hey, old lady? Ha ha ha! A brisk little party same as my Min . . . Eggie old boy, didjer hear that one, old son? I was saying to Mr Farthing here . . . ' Algy was in great form, in spite of an occasional twinge of gout which he advertised with a waggish catcall; and his little jokes were well received, especially by Ern Farthing, who having nothing to say for himself was eager to laugh at anything and everything, and by Alf Catch, the butcher's son. These two youths had been Bob's schoolfellows; yet what

a distance there was between them: the one so spruce and debonair—his tie-pin alone must have cost half the price of a pig—and the other such a slowcoach, such a quiet pedestrian fellow! It was notorious that Ern Farthing couldn't say boo to a goose, and, if the invitations had been left to Bob, Ern's claim to a seat at the party might have been overlooked. But here he was, for old times' sake, and his father and mother were with him, to say nothing of three negligible elder sisters.

'You'll keep your eye on that girl of yours, Mr Algernon, if you take my advice.' It was the voice of Mr Farthing, whose white hairs now commanded, among friends, the admiring attention once given to his jokes.

'I didn't quite catch you, Mr Farthing, old friend.'

Mr Farthing tried again: 'That girl of yours, I said, that lively young party you was speaking of, you better keep an eye on her, Mr Algy, with these 'ere young men about.' Everybody laughed. Mr Farthing, failing to catch Algernon's eye, rose with an effort from his chair and leaned across the table: 'Mr Algy, a word with you.'

'Hey? Certainly, old friend!'

'What I wanta say, don't take me amiss, that's all. What I said about your good lady here. Nothing personal, y'know. No, no, no. Just my chaffing way, that's all.' The two rival humorists solemnly shook hands, and Mr Farthing resumed his seat.

'Ah, but there's a face I'd like to have seen here,'

said Carrie, with the air of continuing the conversation. 'And that's dear old Mr Pummice's face.' For Carrie, too, was at her son's party, having left her bed of sickness and pain for the express purpose of 'seeing to everything'. And she had brought her party manners with her, a curious blend of hospitable gaiety and sad unction. 'Ah, well, we must all come to it in the Lord's good time,' said she.

'What, old Mr Pummice gone?' said Uncle Algernon. 'I hadn't heard!'

Farthing nodded. 'This twelvemonth or more. The yella jarnders, it was. Why,' added Mr Farthing in a tone of pleased reminiscence, 'your brother and me was bearers!'

Mr Pummice was not the only neighbour who would never again see the sun shining or the rain falling on Farringay High Street, and for a while the talk turned on death. 'Ah,' sighed Carrie, the pride of the Ebenezerites, 'and I know who'll be the next to be taken. And if it's the Lord's will, I'm ready . . . Now where's that dratted Elp! Sleena! Come 'ere, girl, with that teapot! Where are you running off to *now*, pray? If I've told you once I've told you *twenty* times . . . ' Selina Bush, the Elp, had been engaged at the age of seventeen to take Mabe's place as general household drudge. She was now a very mature twenty-two, a thin slip of a girl, rather pretty in a colourless fashion, and at her best just after her face had been washed. Nothing could have exceeded her

devotion to Nicky and Egg, between whom and the wrath of Carrie she eagerly interposed her simple personality.

'Say, Eggie old man! What a pity old Sarah and old Ernest couldn't a come! And the girls too.' By 'the girls' Algy meant his four younger sisters who—some married, some virgin, all out of sight and generally out of mind—were scattered to the four points of the compass.

Egg deplored the remark, for he had taken care not to expose himself to rebuff by asking Sarah—who was, after all, a real Vicar's wife—to attend her nephew's celebrations. 'Oh, Sarah's not so well nowadays, I fancy,' he said. 'Nor so young as she was, come to think of it.'

Egg contributed a remark to the general noise whenever he could think of anything to say, and at other times, nervously affable, he laughed and murmured rather vaguely, and to no one in particular: 'Splendid! Splendid!' He, in common with these others, and with Harold and Nicky and the two strange young men described as 'Bob's business friends', was more or less enjoying the festive confusion. Bob himself, you would have said, carried the only perfectly cool head among them. If numbers counted for anything it would be a highly successful party.

The feast was called high tea; and the viands included ham, pork pie, boiled eggs, sardines, pressed beef sandwiches, bread and butter, various jams, and a magnificent birthday cake made by

Mother for Mother's Boy. Accompanying these dainties was a generous supply of dark brown tea, tea with a tang to it, under whose stimulating influence Carrie Pandervil, getting the ear of the company by addressing herself intimately to each member in turn, discoursed largely of life and motherhood and what it meant to be tied down, as you might say, to your bed. 'First it come on in the small of the back, Aunty Min, and then it spread itself up round the side of me—no, not the left side, the right side—and what with this place and that place and the other place, soon it was pains all over. What do you think of that, Mr Farthing! Pains all over it was. But there!—I mustn't sit here talking about my alimence. I'm only telling *you*, Uncle Algy, because you're a man of the world and understands things, and a better uncle never breathed as I'm sure my boy will bear me out. 'Ave a bit more of this pie, Ern, do! What, finished already! Couldn't so much as *look* at food, Aunty Min, when them pains was at their worst. Could I, Mabe? Your Uncle Algy understands what sickness is, him with his poor gout. And you, Daniel boy, and you, I daresay, Alf Catch, young as you are and strong too by God's blessing, *you* understand that a person doesn't take any pleasure in being ill and lying a-bed when they might be up and doing, as poor Mr Pummice used to say, if only they had their health and strength. Another cup of tea, Alf? *That's* right. All over my back the pains come,

Aunty Min, and in my stomach too. Not what I'd call a *gnoring* pain, Uncle Algy, but a sort of nagging, *achey* pain. A sort of *achey* pain, Mr Farthing. And sometimes in the middle of the night I feel as I can't bear this cross a minute longer, what with giving so much trouble and being in the way, as I can't help seeing, not being a blind bat. Sometimes, as my Mabe well knows—don't you, ducky?—I feel as though . . . Daddy! Why don't you cut Mr Farthing another slice of cake! It's there to be eaten, Mr Farthing, you know. It don't want saving for the birds.'

Mr Farthing held up an arresting hand. 'No, Egg, my dear fellow.' At last—startling innovation!—these old friends addressed each other familiarly. 'Not another crumb, Mrs P, thanking you all the same as I'm sure we all do. I've done splendidly. A fair treat, I'm sure. And great praise due to the cook!'

Everybody applauded this sentiment.

'Ah!' sighed Carrie, smiling round the table. 'It's nice to be among friends who'll take us as they find us. When I was younger . . . '

'When you was younger, Mrs P,' interposed old Farthing, with a bow, 'you'd a made two large cakes instead of one large cake. And when I was younger I'd 'ave eaten the blessed lot.'

'Ha ha ha!' roared Uncle Algy. 'I see your meaning, Mr Farthing, sir.' He winked at Mr Farthing, as though to say that this was the kind of joke that only a connoisseur could fully appre-

ciate. 'I take your point, old friend. Ha ha ha!'

'Well,' said Carrie, 'if you've really all finished, and won't change your minds, Sleena can clear the things away . . . Sleena, where you got to, girl?'

'Your clock right, Eggie, old son?' asked Uncle Algy. 'Bit fast according to me.'

'Ten minutes fast as near as nothing,' said Egg. 'Or so I fancy. Perhaps Bob here could tell us the exact time. Eh, Bob?'

This was considered very cunning of Egg, and won him great applause, for everybody knew that Uncle Algy and Aunty Min had given Bob a magnificent watch for his birthday; and this was the sign for that young man to pull it out of his pocket and expose it to the admiration of the company.

'Stuff and nonsense, my boy!' said Uncle Algy, with hearty depreciation of his gift. 'You deserve something better than that, from what I hear of you. What, is it still going! Well, I *am* surprised! D'ye hear that, Min? That twopenny ha'penny bit of a brass ticker is still going.'

'Get along with you, Uncle Algy!' cried Mabe, leading the protestants. '*That's* never brass. That's *gold*, that is. And well you know it.'

Uncle Algy resolutely turned his back on the temptation to embroider the theme. 'Yes, Eggie old son, I hear great things of Master Bob. Bray-vo, *Bob!* Not content with scholarships in galore, me lord must needs go and crown all by

getting a high-class little job in an office! Isn't that the idea, Bob my boy?'

'Yes, Uncle,' said Bob indifferently. 'Estate agents. Not much at first, but it may lead to something better.'

Someone gave Egg a nudge. It was Mr Farthing. 'Who d'ye think I had a letter from 'smorning, Egg Pandervil?'

'Dunno,' said Egg.

'You'd never guess!'

'Woont I?' said Egg, with a grin. 'Then you tell me, friend. It'll save time.'

'Wimmett!' said Mr Farthing explosively.

'Go on! Not Wimmett!'

'Yes, Wimmett himself.'

'Well I never!' exclaimed Egg. 'Wimmett himself! And whatta *dee* got to say?'

'Message for you,' said Mr Farthing. 'Member me to all old friends, specially Mr Pandervil. Seems he's got some sort of a regular job at last, warehouseman up in the city. Keeps things going but they 'ave to live in two rooms—yes, the whole dang lot of them . . . Well, of course they've the two girls out in service now, so that's something.'

'Hard,' ruminated Egg. 'Man of his age, y'know. Must be a tidy bit past sixty.'

'Ay, sixty-six or seven he'll be as I figure it. About a year behind me he was. Member how he used to call himself the Honourable So-and-so Wimmett? And *laugh* at himself for it, so's you'd a thought he would a *died* o' laughing. And slap

'is knee. He was a great knee-slapper, was Mr Wimmett.'

The two friends contemplated in silence for a while this rather surprising picture of a man who had seemed to most people quite the reverse of robust and jocular. But Egg made allowanes for his friend's view. Mr Farthing had always been a great joker, and Mr Wimmett had always laughed uproariously at his jokes.

'A saddish sort of man in a way,' ventured Egg.

'In a way,' conceded Mr Farthing reluctantly. 'I wonder,' he added, 'how it began, that little joke of his about the Honourable So-and-so Wimmett?'

'Oh, that! Some nonsense of mine, I believe . . . I forget,' said Egg, remembering. 'Wasn't much of a joke anyhow . . . Who's that trying to knock the house down, I wonder?'

'Someone at the door, Daddy!' cried Carrie sharply.

But young Harold had already gone out of the room to find out what was the matter. He presently returned, followed by slow footsteps and an ominous tap-tap of a stick. Harold held open the door; everybody stopped talking and looked up, half in alarm; so that Mrs Noom achieved just the entry that in the days of her prime she would have desired. She stood in the doorway blinking at the sudden light; for the parlour was illuminated and the journey through the 'hall passage' had been a dark journey, with

only a distant gleam to guide her. Even now, it seemed, she could not see the company very distinctly; for at first she stared up at the ceiling as though she had been a blind woman. In this attitude she waited, listening. Her face, so aged and frail and sunken in the cheeks, was enigmatic, giving no hint at all of what was in her mind. Because so old, because she might—one felt—at any moment drop dead, she was an intimidating spectacle; and the silence, persisting for several seconds after her entry, was a reluctant tribute to that fact.

She opened her mouth to speak, baring her one tooth. 'Well, my dears! You're not very pleased to see Granny, I'll be bound!'

'Why, Ma,' said Egg, moving forward to greet her, 'we'd quite given you up! Still, better late than never, you know. Eh?' He laughed nervously.

The ancient woman now lowered her gaze from the ceiling and stared about her, scanning the faces of the guests. 'What's the matter with 'em all?' she asked Egg. 'Aint they got tongues in their 'eads?'

'Here's a chair for you, Granny,' said Bob. 'Won't you sit down?'

'Who's dead?' inquired Mrs Noom. With help from Egg she slowly lowered herself into the chair. 'Who did you say it was, Egg? I've lasted them out, whoever they are.' She tittered feebly. 'He he he! I've lasted them out.'

'It's Bob's birthday,' said Egg. 'We're having a party for him. You remember, Ma! We come and tell you only last week. Bob's twenty-one to-day.'

'Bob?' Mrs Noom wrinkled again her wrinkled brow. 'Bob, d'you say? Now which Bob would that be? Did he make a nice corpse?'

Egg wished the others wouldn't sit and stare so curiously and silently. 'Rubbish, old lady!' he said. 'It's our Bob's birthday, I tell you. Birthday. Your grandson, our Bob.'

'My grandson! My little Bobby!' She dabbed at her eyes with a wad of handkerchief. 'And nobody even told me he was sadly, poor lamb!'

Egg, with the assistance of Bob himself, began again at the beginning of the story. But in the middle of their joint narration the inner door opened and Carrie entered, followed by Mabe, and, timidly, by Selina Bush.

'Is that my dear Carrie?' cried Mrs Noom. 'She *will* be pleased to see me, bless 'er kind 'eart!'

'Ma! 'Owever did *you* get here?' Carrie ran forward and kissed her mother.

'On my legs, girl. First one foot, then the other.'

'Why, you might 'ave caught your death a night like this! So late and all. Why, it's eight o'clock nearly. Isn't it, Bob darling? Show Granny your beautiful watch, do, that your Uncle Algy and your Aunty Min give you.'

Mrs Noom laughed satirically. 'She's my

daughter, she is.' No one answering her she leaned pointedly towards Mrs Farthing. 'I say, she's my daughter.'

Mrs Farthing smiled vaguely and uttered soothing noises. 'Yes, yes, Mrs Noom. Of course she is.'

'That's why she turned me out into the street. Twenty year ago, a bitter winter's morning.'

'What's she telling you?' cried Carrie.

'I'm talking to Mrs Thingummy here,' said Mrs Noom sharply. 'I'll thank you to hold your tongue, my girl. And when her own father was dying, dying on his deathbed he was, d'you know what she done, that fine daughter of mine? You don't. Well, I'll tell you. Wouldn't come near 'im, she wouldn't, no, not with me begging and praying her on me bended knees, she wouldn't. That's dear Carrie, that is . . . Bobby, where's my Bobby? I've said my say, and enough's enough.'

She trembled to her feet and stood swaying. 'It's been a treat to see you all so happy,' she said, staring at the ceiling. 'Good night, my dears! I'm not dying on you this time. That's to come.' Tittering, supported by Bob's arm, she moved slowly back into the darkness.

3

When the last guest was gone, and Carrie and Bob had retired to their beds, Egg heaved a deep

sigh and began performing his customary ritual of winding the big clock and making sure that all doors and windows were fast. Seeing a thread of light under the scullery door, he deduced that Selina had not yet finished the washing-up, and in his slippered feet—quietly, afraid of disturbing the household—he glided through the kitchen to remonstrate with her, being at once impatient and sympathetic. The door yielded to his push, and Selina's home, thirty-six square feet of bleakness and squalor, was revealed to him. Selina was bending over the sink, from which rose the steam and smell of greasy hot water. In her right hand she held a wet dishcloth; with the other she was feebly fending off the teasing amorous attentions of Egg's second son, Harold. Her face was averted from the boy, the tip of her nose being within half-an-inch of the plate-rack on her right. Before Egg could make his presence known, the situation quickly resolved itself. 'Oh 'ave it your own way then!' cried Selina indulgently. She turned her face to Harold, received his kiss on her mouth, and pushed him away with motherly decisiveness. 'Now leave me be!'

'Harold, whad you doing 'ere!' Egg felt shocked and ashamed and perhaps a little excited. Yes, he was excited, slightly but indubitably, and it was that which made him ashamed. That young good-for-nothing Harold! He must be taught a lesson, by God he must! 'How dare you!' shouted Egg angrily. 'How dare you!' The im-

pudence of it, the impudence! The easy careless way she had offered her mouth, her young mouth! It was beautiful, terrible, disgraceful. And it must be put a stop to at once. We can't have this kind of thing going on. Ah, if only we could! 'Be off with you, sir! Be off to bed at once. And . . . and . . . and you'll sweep that shop out in the morning at six o'clock—six o'clock d'you hear?—or I'll know the reason why.' Such things to happen in a respectable house! He glared at Harold. Harold, with flaming face and downcast eyes, slouched past him and away.

'As for you, Selina!' Egg could think of nothing adequate to say. He could only say: 'I'm surprised at you. Your ma shall hear of this, let me tell you!'

Sniffing loudly, and dropping tears into the greasy water, Selina made pretence at getting on with her work.

'And I think,' said Egg, 'you better take a month's notice.'

He spoke almost without intention, and largely at random. He was saying the things that he supposed ought to be said, the things—some of them—that Carrie would have said in his place. What he said came not from himself but from some piece of automatic mechanism in his mind. He himself was in the grip of quite other thoughts. He was hunted, bewildered. He saw himself as a kind of satyr running naked and joyous in a wood, and he was horrified at the sight. How

could a man at his age think such thoughts! He had almost forgotten Selina, but he remembered —though not the phrase—'the women of the Seraglio'. A moment ago he had hated Selina, and hated Harold, for the discomfort they had caused him, for making him an eavesdropper, for dropping a spark of madness into the dry dangerous tinder of his heart. But he hated her no longer. She was nothing after all—a mere blubbering drab of a girl.

That last threat of his made her turn and face him. She was appalled and reproachful. 'You woont do that, Mr Pandervil! You'd never turn me out, and me a Banana girl!'

'Whadja mean?' Anger was lost in curiosity. 'I don't understand you.'

'Doctor Banana zomes,' said Selina. 'I aint got any Mars and Pars, and never 'ad. You oughta know that. You'd never turn me out when I 'aven't done no 'arm!'

He realized that what she said by way of an appeal was in fact no more than the sober truth. He wouldn't and couldn't turn her out, and never for one moment had he intended to do so. He had frightened the girl; he had struck a blow for proper behaviour, made an effective protest against 'goings-on'; and that was enough. What remained to be said was more practical.

'Now look here, Selina, let this be a lesson to you, my girl. No one wants to be 'ard on you, I'm sure. It's more the boy's fault than yours, I

could see that right enough. But there's to be no more of it, see? I'm telling you for your own good, see? What I mean to say you better mind yourself. He's not a boy now, not 'ardly. He's getting on for a man, sixteen and more, and once you let him start taking liberties . . . well, just you mind what I tell you.' The picture of that swift kissing mouth flashed in and out of his mind as he added: 'Apart from what's right and proper, 'tisn't safe. See?'

'Jou mean,' said Selina, 'as I won't 'ave to go away? I *will* be good, Mr Pandervil. Straight I will. It was on'y to stop 'im worriting of me while I was about me work I did it. You going to let me stay, Mr Pandervil?' A fresh storm of weeping shook her.

'Oh, be done with that crying set-out!' Egg spoke sharply, his nerves quivering. 'You've no call to cry, Selina. We're not turning you out, no such thing. Bless my soul 'aven't you gotta 'ankerchief, girl! 'Ere, take mine and for mercy's sake use it!' The weeping became more copious. 'And what's the matter with you now! Stop it, can't you!'

Selina raised her wet, red, quivering face. 'You're so g-g-good to me!' she blubbered. 'You always b-b-bin so good.'

'What about getting these crocks washed?' retorted Egg, severely. 'My, you're a pretty sight. If your Doctor Banana saw you now, Selina, he'd 'ave a fit, that's what he'd 'ave. Here—*I'll* do them. You get along to your bed, a girl your age!'

He snatched the dishcloth from her hand and turned towards the sink.

'Having a nice time, Eggie dear, you and Selina?'

Carrie, muffled in a dressing-gown, stood in the doorway. A venomous smile twisted her lips.

'I'm glad,' said Carrie, 'you 'ad the sense to send Harold away before you started.' She turned on Selina. 'What are you waiting for, madam? Me 'usband won't be wanting you again to-night.'

Alone in the scullery, husband and wife confronted each other. Egg, with his back against the sink, stood at bay, pale, angry, and frightened: frightened because he so bitterly hated scenes, and a scene was always the weapon with which Carrie punished his real or imaginary negligences and misdeeds. There was a twinge, too, of guilt in him, guilt for nothing that he had done or intended but—for what? He didn't know. He felt wretched, desperate, even murderous; perhaps in that moment he came as near as he could ever come to murder, for he caught himself thinking how easily with his strong hands he could strangle this alien woman and fling her out of his life for ever.

Shocked by this thought he became eager to defend himself.

'I caught Harold . . .' But he left the sentence unfinished. He rejected that baseness. What Harold had done seemed no longer an impropriety to be bruited and execrated, but a confidence that he must respect.

'Well? You caught Harold. . . .'

'Caught Harold! Nothing of the sort. I found him here, that's all. Helping the girl wash up, he was. I sent him to bed, seeing it was so late.'

'I thought as much.' Carrie was ominously quiet; she was working herself up to boiling-point; in a moment or two, he knew, she would scream at him. 'And then, after 'e'd gorn, my precious 'usband stayed and helped little Sleena with her work, I s'pose. Is that the story, Eggie dear?'

'No,' said Egg. 'It isn't.' A mood akin to madness took possession of him. I'll have no more of it, he said to himself. I'll teach her a lesson, I will. 'That isn't the story at all, my dear. You wanta know what I bin doing down here with Sleena. Well, I'm going to tell you.' He shook with excitement. 'This is what I bin doing. You listen to me, Carrie, and you'll hear. This is what I bin doing.' His eyes blazed at her. 'I bin making love to the girl. I bin kissing and cuddling of her and . . . I bin making love to her, see? And tomorrow I'm going to do it again, see? So now you know.'

Carrie stared, and the scream came at last. 'Liar!' she cried. His face changed, and she repeated, with new conviction: 'Liar! You'd never dare! You 'aven't got the sperit.' She laughed harshly. 'Think you can fool me, do you!'

'So that's it, is it!' Egg, emptied of his devil, could do nothing but state the obvious. 'If you're so sure of me, why d'you come along with your nasty talk about me and Sleena!'

She could not answer that. For once in his life with her he had the last word. But it profited him nothing. Her barb had carried with it a subtle poison; for he was more than disconcerted, he was shamed, by her instant disbelief in his confession. Was he truly a man without spirit? Ought he from the first to have cuffed and beaten her into respecting him? It was too late for that now, he reflected. But the reflection was only half-sincere, for he knew in his heart that he could never have done quite that.

On the way upstairs she slipped her arm into his and touched his hand. For the moment they were friends again, and at once he became busy with excuses for her misconduct; and then, putting that out of mind, he said pensively, thinking back to that happy past of his invention: 'My word, we've bin a few times up these stairs together, you and me.' She said nothing, and they went together through the darkness to their bedroom, where a lighted candle greeted them. She flung herself wearily into bed and turned her face to the wall. He glanced at her in surprise. She was weeping, and weeping, it seemed, from the heart, for there was no parade or lamentation.

'Anything wrong, Carrie?'

He went over to her and touched the lump she made of the bedclothes. She put her hands up and hid her face. He became alarmed.

'What's the matter, my dear?' Irresolutely he patted her shoulder.

She said nothing; she continued to hide her face.

After staring in perplexity for some minutes he began mechanically undressing. Moving to the chest of drawers to put his collar studs in their accustomed place for the night, he caught sight in the mirror of a grey-whiskered, elderly man, with a pointed chin, a high bald brow, and large dark bewildered eyes. The studs dropped with a tinkle into their saucer.

'Eggie!'

He turned round. Carrie had uncovered her face.

'Yes,' he said, coming again to the bedside.

She gave him a long look. 'D'you wish you'd a never married me?'

'Whatever makes you ask a thing like that,' he said. 'After twenty-eight years of it too!'

She was answered, and perhaps she knew it. He hoped she didn't. 'Yes, there's something you sorta keep back.'

'You've no call to say that, my dear. I don't 'ave any secrets from you. You're not still thinking about that Sleena, are you?'

'No, tisn't a secret I mean. I can't explain. But there's something, something of yourself. You keep it back. You've always kep' it back. Oh, I dunno. Get into bed, do.'

He got into bed, and lay trembling with apprehension of further questioning. And when that fear passed, with Carrie sleeping audibly at his side, he began asking himself what he had done with his life and Carrie's and what she had contributed to that doing, and how things might have

been different between them, and whether . . . And so on a tide of confused wonderings came sleep, the familiar magic that hushes all questions and answers none.

And in the morning Carrie was herself again.

4

Egg had never been encouraged to pay much attention to his daughter. Mabe was decidedly Mother's Girl, just as Bobby was Mother's Boy, and Egg had not, perhaps, been altogether displeased with his consequent isolation in the family, though he did sometimes say to himself that in the Noom household things had been t'other way about. But when Mabe was removed from him by marriage, becoming thereby a new person and one who could be seen with a certain detachment, he fell to thinking about her, wondering what she, in her private mind, was like, and whether marriage for her had proved bitter or sweet or just nothing at all. It surprised him to realize that though he had lived under one roof with his daughter for nearly a quarter of a century he could recall no intimate or revealing conversation with her. Was it his fault or hers? She was a stranger to him, but because he had not until now recognized her as a stranger he had never troubled to get to know her. Yet she was, after all, a person; and behind that plump, sullen, rather stupid face of hers, which he had perfunctorily kissed some ten or twenty thousand times, the mysterious process of

thought went on. Although for the first week or two of her marriage he had missed her about the house, and wished her back again, she had never been really important to him; but it flashed into his mind now—with all the startling brilliance of a new idea—that to herself she was all-important, that to herself she was 'I', just as he to himself was 'I'. He blinked at this revelation, tried to find words for it, got them, lost them, and was left desolate. The glamorous bubble of his little idea was pricked, and, as he served old Miss Hunt, the postmistress, with a bottle of his Own Special Peppermint Wine (try it for your indigestion), he was dismally wondering what it was that had so subtly pleased him a moment before.

'Pleasant morning, Miss Hunt!'

'Beautiful, isn't it, Mr Pandervil! Well, it was time we 'ad a bit of spring weather after that bitter wind. It fair nipped me up. What are your cream biscuits to-day?'

As he told her the price—the unvarying price—of his cream biscuits, Mabe slunk into the shop. 'How do, Miss Hunt! Nice day!' Miss Hunt went out. 'Hallo, Pa! Mar in?' An idle question, for Ma was never out.

'In?' echoed Egg jocularly. 'In bed, d'ye mean? I expect you'll find her about the kitchen somewhere. She's a bit better this morning.' He could tell by Mabe's demeanour that she had brought a load of trouble with her, and that mother and daughter would have a happy miserable hour pick-it over. 'Anything wrong, my girl?'

She looked surprised and a trifle indignant. Her face took on the expression of a sick mule. 'I'll go and find Ma,' said Mabe.

Egg knew himself rejected; and so strong was the influence of his new mood of self-searching that for a while he felt hurt about it, reluctant to face the fact that it was now too late to start making friends with his daughter. Some trouble between her and that Daniel, he thought, and tried to dismiss it from his mind, consoling himself—it was rich consolation—with remembering that to-night young Nicky was to have his weekly bath, and that, in relief of the scandalously overworked Selina, he himself, the surprised father, would supervise that orgy of laughter and splashing and boat-sailing. With Nicky, at least, he had lost no time in making friends, once it had dawned on him—a shy, gradual brightening of his sky—that of all the household he himself was the fittest and the favourite companion of this queer agreeable child; that under the surface of their intercourse, the confidences and the gaiety and the scoldings, something vibrated between them quick and delicate and never to be spoken. This anticipated pleasure coloured all his morning, and made weighing and packing and invoicing and passing the time of day with customers, a series of almost purely mechanical operations.

Just as the clock struck one, Bob came into the shop, a Bob stripped, it seemed, of his customary self-assurance. 'Say, Dad, I want a word with you. D'you think we could go and have a bite

together somewhere? Pardoe's is a pretty decent place. I . . . I got something I want to tell you.'

Egg, to hide his astonishment and alarm, attempted a casual evasion. 'What do we want to go and spend eighteenpence at Pardoe's for, when there's our own food waiting in the kitchen?'

'We can't talk in the kitchen.'

'Can't we?' said Egg. He knew he was being foolish and awkward; but this son so often made him feel that. 'First I've heard of it.'

'Oh, you know what I mean,' said Bob. 'Come on, Dad. Be a sport.'

A thrill travelled up Egg's spine, a thrill that mingled new friendliness with a kind of pride. His smart son, the estate agent's clerk, was inviting him, on terms of equality, to be a sport. The thing was without precedent. His resistance weakened. 'And what am I to say to your mother, pray? She's taking her meals downstairs to-day. P'raps you dint know that?'

Bob shrugged his shoulders. He recognized a palpable difficulty. But in a moment he had braced himself to meet and overcome it. 'Tell you what,' he said, leaning intimately across the counter. 'If you're agreeable, *I*'ll tell Ma. This very minute. I will. How's that?'

Egg waited in not unpleasurable agitation until his son returned from this hazardous mission with a cool 'It's all right, I've squared her for you.' The spirit of holiday began dancing in his heart, for it was fun, undeniably fun, and not a little

grand, to be strolling down the road to take luncheon with one's eldest son—for what at home was 'dinner' became 'luncheon' when it cost ninepence (with napkin) and was served at Pardoe's. Bob counted it lucky that they were alone for the latter part of the meal, and when, at its end, he wiped some glistening crumbs of suet from his mouth and expressed this opinion for the third time, it was evident that something important was to be discussed.

'Well?' said Egg. 'So you want a word with me, do you, my boy?'

'You're right,' said Bob. 'I do, and that's a fact.' He coughed nervously, and his face became slowly crimsoned over with embarrassment. 'I'm going to get married, Dad. That's about the size of it.' He stroked the downy beginnings of a moustache, striving to look manly and casual, and succeeding in looking at least ten years old. Egg had never liked the young man so much before.

'I see,' said Egg. He was envious and he was compassionate. 'And you 'aven't told your mother?'

'You bet I haven't.'

'And you don't much like the job?'

'Can't say I do,' admitted Bob, staring down at his dirty plate and shuffling his feet in confusion. 'And there's reasons enough for that. Fact is, I want you to promise to say nothing about it till I give the word.'

Egg stared. He was this boy's father, and something had got to be done about this affair.

'Well, out with it, my boy. Who's the girl?' It occurred to him—and he half-smiled at the thought—that he ought to have asked that question before. But until this moment he had almost forgotten that his son's marriage involved a particular girl, and not the vague and radiant embodiment of young girlhood that in his own mind was evoked by what he had been told.

'Well,' said Bob, speaking very slowly, with long painful pauses between his phrases, 'that's the trouble, you see. I don't know that you'll be so extra special pleased about it. It's not a girl you know. Don't suppose you've ever seen her. In fact I'm jolly well sure you haven't. She lives out Keston way.'

Egg's agitation provoked him to sarcasm. 'Has she got a name, this girl, as well as an address?'

'Kitty Dyce is her name, and—well, she's all right, naturally.' Bob hurried past the question of her personal excellence. 'I'm . . . we . . . she . . . well, we're pretty far gone on each other, if you want to know. So that's that,' finished Bob defiantly.

Egg considered this pronouncement. He could hardly believe that they were at the end of the story. 'And what's all this about your not telling your mother? That don't seem to fit in somehow. She's got to be told, you know that 'swell as I do.'

'She'll have to be told some time, of course,' agreed Bob. 'But not yet. I'd rather she wasn't.'

Egg became peevish. 'That's silly talk. Still I

suppose you can keep it quiet for a bit if you're so set on it. But whyja bring *me* into it?'

Bob looked up in astonishment. 'Well, that's a funny way to take it, Dad, I *must* say. You wouldn't a had me get married without telling *anybody*, would you! Not you! You'd a bin the first to complain. I thought being a man you'd understand how a chap feels.'

'All right!' said Egg. 'Steady does it, my boy. Don't excite yourself. But I *don't* understand, not yet I don't. You 'aven't told me everything. By the way you're talking it looks to me as though you want to make a fool of yourself. Want to get married to-morrow, I suppose. Is that it?'

'That's it, near enough,' muttered Bob sulkily.

'Bob!' said Egg, eyeing his son sternly. 'Are you talking serious?'

'You bet I am!'

'You think you can get married, and you not turned twenty-two and earning next to nothing a week! Tie yourself up for life to some girl you've just said How-d'ye-do to! For life, mind you. For *life*. I know what I'm talking of, so make no mistake about it.'

'It's to be a secret marriage,' said Bob, trying to take no notice of his father's outburst. 'That's why I'm telling you. We shan't set up house, not for a year or two, not till I've made my way a bit. She'll go on at her work, and I'll go on at mine, and no one will know we're married at all till . . . they do. Only I thought I'd like you to know, you being a man.'

Egg was touched and grateful, but he thought it his duty to dissemble gratitude. 'Work? What's she working at?'

'Well, that's just it,' explained Bob, at once eager and sheepish. 'Mother's got such big ideas, I'd never hear the last of it. She's . . . well, she's a general servant, if you want to know, down Keston way.'

Egg remained deep in thought for a few minutes. At last he said: 'There's worse things than general servants. My own mother was in service once, and I never died of it. And there's an aunt of yours——'

'I know!' Bob was triumphant. ''Tisn't our place to be high and mighty. And I wouldn't care if she was a gutter-girl, for myself. It was only Ma I was thinking of.'

'Yes, I daresay,' remarked Egg. 'But there's more in it than that, my boy. What's the hurry? That's what you haven't told me. And I'm waiting to hear.'

'There's reasons for hurry,' said Bob.

'Oh, there is, is there!'

'Very good reasons,' said Bob, drawing patterns on the tablecloth with his forefinger. 'It's all my fault, and I'm not going to let her down, and I don't care what anyone says. It was none of her doing.'

'None of her doing, wasn't it!' What a noodle the boy is, thought Egg. Thinks he did it all by himself, I s'pose. 'I'm surprised at you, Bob!' That seemed so inadequate that he added, not with

complete conviction: 'And I'm ashamed of you, what's more!' In both these statements he lied, partly in the interests of good morals, but more because he must at all costs conceal from Bob how greatly alarmed and horrified he was by the prospect of a scandal in the family. Fancy having to break this news to Carrie! It was too dreadful to be faced. But the next instant it flashed into his mind how years ago, when he was Bob's age, he had carried upstairs Jinny Randall heavy with her child and Willy's; and he yearned towards his son, but could only repeat: 'I'm ashamed of you!' And he added, in real exasperation: 'First Harold, then you! It's too much of a good thing!'

'Harold!' Bob's eyes widened with curiosity. 'What's young Harold been up to?'

'Nothing at all!' snapped Egg. 'He knows how to behave himself, Harold does. Which is more than you do, seemingly.'

'Oh, you don't understand,' said Bob wearily. 'I don't suppose you've ever felt like Kitty and me feel. Pretty clear you haven't. You've never been what I'd call in love, have you?'

Egg, having essayed irony several times in this interview, now for the first time achieved it. 'No, my boy, I never have. Old fogey like me, don't know what love is. Suppose you tell me, eh?'

Not entirely obtuse, Bob had the grace to blush for himself. 'Anyway, Dad, you see how it is. I want to marry her. Quite apart from all this bother, I want to marry her. And I've just got to. You do see that, don't you?"

They rose, paid their bill, and walked back to the shop. As they crossed the threshold together, Egg took his son's arm and slightly, shyly, pressed it, grateful that the boy had not thought it necessary to demand a formal promise of secrecy. The future—at which for a moment he cocked a timid speculative eye—could hold little but storm for him, dark days and angry seas. Pandervil's was still yielding no more than a precarious livelihood, and Harold was the most reluctant of assistants. To look forward was no better than to look back, and to look back was bitterness. Passion, for him, had flowered vainly; budded and blossomed and spilled its scent in a desolate place and was now withered away. Yet there remained things in life that he would have been reluctant to lose. There was this belated feeling of kinship with his eldest son. There was friendship and neighbourliness, saying How-do to familiar faces, a pipe of tobacco of an evening when Carrie had gone early to bed, and a quiet read of the noozepaper, and summer mornings, and the way the slate roofs of the High Street glistened after rain. And, to-night, there was Nicky to be bathed.

5

The bath, which failed to resemble porcelain only because it looked somehow better than porcelain, so cunningly had the paint been applied—the bath demands a word to itself. It was new; it was Selina's pride and care; it possessed two brass taps

that were polished every day and never used (hot water was carried upstairs in saucepans); and it was the monument to a great event. It was Uncle Algy, and he alone, who had instantly with a prescience little short of extraordinary, recognized the greatness of the event. While others joined hearts, and sometimes voices, in deploring that yet another child was born to Carrie and Egg, Uncle Algy, paying them one of his infrequent but regular visits, was as hearty in his applause as he had been on previous and similar occasions; the house echoed with his 'Bray-vo, *Carrie!* Bray-vo, *Egg!* Bray-vo, *Baby!*' And, with a change of accent that gave new and hearty emphasis to his pleasure and surprise: 'Bray-*vo!*' Ever since his unexpected emancipation from farm-work and his espousal both of auctioneering and Aunty Min, Uncle Algy had bounced through life like a balloon—for time persisted in inflating him—heartily applauding and patronizing everything. And here at last was something to which with aptness as well as enthusiasm he could apply his favourite adjective; for Nicky was indeed little, the very smallest baby, thought Egg (who was no judge, however), that had ever been born. 'I *'ad* thought of spoons, Carrie,' said Uncle Algy surprisingly. 'I 'ad thought of a silver spoon, y'know, Eggie old son. But no, 'e don't want spoons. And besides there's plenty of such in the house already. Ha ha ha! No, seriously, Eggie, what I'll do is I'll give him a bath, old boy. Hear that, Carrie? I'll give the little man a bath. Blest if I don't!' Carrie, fail-

ing to seize his drift, objected that he would take and drop the child, a remark of which Uncle Algy reminded her upon every succeeding visit. And when the bath came, newfangled affair though it was and a ridiculous expense no doubt, Carrie allowed it was very handsome of Uncle Algy. And Egg was overwhelmed to the point of feeling awkward about it. 'That's nothing, old boy. Nothing at all, is it, Min, my dear!' For Uncle Algy was by way of being a rich relation, and though he took a franker pleasure in savouring his generosity than modern delicacy would approve, one could hardly grudge him his naive self-approval. 'I haven't exactly gone down in the world, Eggie, and I won't pretend I have. But I'm never too big to remember old times, boy, and blood's thicker than water, whatever you may say.' And so here, mute witness to the inferior density of water, stood Nicky's bath; and though its taps were not connected to a cistern, it had a real plughole, with a plug that hung on a stout chain, and the water that was carried up by Selina did not need to be carried down again but escaped through a waste-pipe to the cesspool at the end of the garden. Here stood the bath, and here, with his father in attendance, was Nicky ready to use it.

Well, not quite ready, for first he must be undressed. 'Shall I be a rabbit, Dad, and you skin me?'

Egg thought this a good plan. He whipped out an imaginary knife and skinned his rabbit expertly. He was always surprised that Nicky, who had in-

vented it, did not find this a rather gruesome game.

'Oooo!' cried Nicky.

'Does it hurt?' asked Egg.

'It hurts something awful,' said Nicky. His father stared down into his face. Nicky gravely returned the look. 'It only pretends to hurt, you know.'

Footsteps approached the door; went past; came back; stopped. 'Eggie dear!' It was Carrie's voice.

'Yes, Mother?' answered Egg.

Carrie came in. The two Pandervils faced her with questions in their eyes. 'I'm bad again,' said Carrie. 'Whether you like it or not, you better know. I'm going to bed.'

'Can I do anything for you? Make you something hot? Rub you?'

'I'm going to bed,' said Carrie. 'Oh no, you can't do anything. I must bear the cross alone if it's God's will, though what I've done to deserve all this pain I *don't* know. I'm going back to bed, and never oughta 'ave left it. People don't know 'ow bad it takes me. But never mind.' She paused at the door, and added in raised tones: 'And there's another thing, Father. You'll have to speak to Daniel.'

'Speak to 'im?'

'Yes, speak to 'im. He's not treating my girl right. Not by a long way he isn't.'

'What's he bin doing?' asked Egg. 'I *thought* there was something 'smorning.'

'Fast and loose,' said Carrie. 'On the drink and worse. There's a lot o' dirty sluts in this town, let me tell you. Wish I could lay me 'ands on 'em. Not that I'd *touch* 'em. I should think not indeed! You gotta speak to 'im about it.'

'Um,' said Egg.

'Oh, you may *um!*' retorted Carrie angrily. 'You oughta never a let my girl marry a man like that.' She went out, slamming the door behind her.

'What's dirty sluts?' asked Nicky.

'Stuff you get in the water after your bath,' said Egg. 'That soapy scummy stuff as you see wriggling down into the plughole. Now, are we ready?'

Nicky made a mysterious face enjoining silence. He crept closer to his father and whispered: 'There might be a mouse in the bath, you know. So we must go very quietly and take a peep. Shall we?'

They did.

'There he goes,' whispered Nicky hoarsely. 'Can you see him?'

'Yes. Don't he swim fast!' exclaimed Egg admiringly.

'He's not *swimming*,' said Nicky reproachfully. He's running. On top of the water, like Jesus. He does run fast, don't he? And in a minute he'll run faster and faster and faster and faster.'

'Shouldn't wonder,' agreed Egg.

Such a possibility was worth watching for.

'I told you he would!' said Nicky. 'He ran as fast as a real one, didn't he!'

In due time Nicky suffered himself to be hoisted into the water and to be soaped and sponged all over. He talked a great deal throughout these processes, and Egg, who privately believed, without irony or reservation of any kind, that this was the pleasantest and cleverest child in the world, sustained his part of the conversation with an unvarying gravity of demeanour and a dancing lightness of heart. And the moment came when Nicky, fortified by his father's presence, found courage to pull the plug up by its chain. With Selina it was a different matter, for the last gurgle of the water was apt, with the help of her artful fancies, to bear a very sinister interpretation. Egg was more genial company, and, when that funny ugly noise did at last occur, Nicky was able to shout with a pleasure unalloyed by fear: 'Go away, you dirty sluts!' And as he lifted the pink and steaming child out of the bath and planted him carefully on the cork mat, this elderly grocer chanced to recall an odd saying that his own mother had been wont to use on bath-nights, more than half a century before, in Mershire. 'And now,' said Egg Pandervil, 'you're fit to kiss the ladies!'

PART TWO

CHAPTER THE FIRST

THE CUB

I

SEEING their camp-fire burn low, the two boys hastened to replenish it with sticks and fir-cones and handfuls of crisp rust-coloured leaves; and when the fire blazed again they squatted down in the long grass, which, under the onrush of darkness, was beginning to sigh and rustle and change its greenness for the colour of slate-roofs. Responding to the mood of the hour and the magic desolation of the scene about them, they were silent for a long while. From time to time one of them, without getting up, tossed another stick or two into the flames. They felt lonely, courageous, mature. A cold wind fluttered out of nowhere and blew the woodsmoke—an acrid memorable smell—into their sensitive young nostrils. The elder boy, Ralph Tooley, was thirteen years old. The younger, Nicky Pandervil, was not quite twelve. Between them they had just relieved Kimberley.

From where he sat, hugging his knees, Nicky could see the field slanting darkly and steeply

under him to the marshy bulrush beds, and thence rise again, in a more gradual ascent, to the row of conker-trees that flanked Coppett's Avenue. To the west, which was still stained with the after-glow of sunset, the chimney-pots of Albert Road presented to his vision a serrated horizon that might have been cut out of black paper, so artificial and insubstantial did it seem. At one point to the north-east, precisely at the east end of Coppett's Avenue, stood the ugly extensive building known as Coppett's Asylum for Infirm Watchmakers and Clockmakers, a place which Nicky's imagination, misled by a not unnatural confusion of ideas, peopled with aged bespectacled lunatics who spent what remained to them of life in a fantasy of witless and everlasting watchmending. In all other directions nothing was visible but field and trees and wool-gathering sky. Crouched on the summit of his green hill, at his back a belt of pines that completely hid the villas of Victoria Avenue a quarter of a mile away, he felt that at any moment, if he so chose, he could float out into space and remain indefinitely hovering in that mysterious middle distance. Coppett's Piece bred such fancies, especially when dusk came with its cold sighing breath, and elms and oaks, having quietly dreamed the afternoon long, became quick with whispering noises. Abandoned by Coppett—a benefactor of whom little beyond his name is known—and not yet seized by the ubiquitous builder, it was a region queer, romantic, desolate, and delightful: queer by virtue of its switchback contours, those two

monkey-trees, that suggestive fragment of brick wall, and that sculptured faun lying on his back naked and abandoned in the grass; and delightful because, although Nicky, the grocer's son, could reach it from his home in half an hour, it was in spirit so utterly remote from Farringay High Street. Coppett's Piece was a place where anything might happen.

At this very moment something began to happen.

'I spy blaggs,' said Nicky, suddenly breaking the silence.

'Where?' asked his companion sharply.

'Over there!' Nicky jumped to his feet and pointed. 'There's one, two . . .'

His computation was interrupted. 'Get down, you goat!' said Tooley. 'If they're really blaggs, we'll have to jolly well look out.'

Nicky, dropping into the grass, realized that his hero Tooley was afraid. This distressed him: not because he despised the weakness but because, on the contrary, he shared it. His own fear was as yet of negligible dimensions, easy to control and to conceal: it owed its tenuous existence only to the face that 'scooting' at sight of an enemy was against the code.

'There's four of em,' said Tooley, having crept on his belly to a point of vantage. 'One's got a basket. Wonder what they're up to.'

'Have they seen us, do you think?' asked Nicky. 'Our smoke'll give us away, I expect.'

Tooley made no answer, being still absorbed

in his work of observation. Presently he said over his shoulder: 'It's two to one, Pandy. And one of 'em's got a basket.'

It made matters the worse, to Nicky's mind, that one of them should carry a basket. The phrase had a sinister quality for him, and he wondered if Tooley shared this feeling. The enemy was no longer in his line of vision, for he still, remembering Tooley's rebuke, kept under cover. It was in his mind to ask: 'Shall we do a bunk, or stick it?' But by long experience he knew himself incapable of voicing the suggestion. Two to one was heavy odds, in face of which you might retreat with dignity; but he looked to Tooley for a lead, that being the convention of their relationship; a chap could not seem to show funk until encouraged by his seniors to do so. Had the enemy been folks of their own kind, Nicky would not have felt like this. But these were different. The alien world, the world that existed beyond his immediate circle of friends and acquaintances, was divided for Nicky into blaggs and sops. These were enemy. He and his friends were ordinary folk. Sops, most of whom attended the Farringay Grammar School and flaunted green velvet caps with a golden badge, were objects rather of derision—perhaps of secret envy—than of definite hostility. But blaggs were quite another story, something almost subhuman. Blaggs—a term etymologists take pleasure in relating to blackguards — comprehended board-school boys, junior tramps, ill-disposed and ill-dressed strangers, and, pre-eminently, errand-boys

with baskets. They were malicious and dirty; above all, dirty. There are two kinds of dirt. There is the honest dirt acquired by climbing trees and making mud-marbles, and, in general, not being a sop; and there is a dirt more than skin-deep, a pungent terrifying foulness perceptible equally to ears and eyes and nostrils—an emanation, as it seemed to Nicky, from the very soul of this alien race. In conflict with your fellows you might get black eyes and a bloody nose, and, what was even worse, you might get torn clothes that would mean dire trouble at home. All this was natural and acceptable enough. But once get caught by blaggs, and there was no knowing what they would do to you. In was this unknown that Nicky dreaded. There were bloodcurdling stories told, and these, though he happily did not recall them now, had left a precipitate of terror in him.

'Are they coming this way?' asked Nicky.

'Shut your row!' whispered Tooley. 'They'll hear you.'

Without more words it was understood between them that though honour did not demand as yet that they should provoke a battle they were none the less precluded from deserting the field of danger. They were permitted to remain under cover; they were not permitted to retire. Each in his secret heart recognized, and perhaps a little resented, this romantic prohibition.

Once again Tooley glanced sharply over his shoulder, but now, though his lips moved, he made

no sound. By this portent Nicky knew that the worst of the ordeal was yet to come and that the enemy was nearing them. Exquisite the anxiety of the next few minutes, during which time the boy, not being absorbed in the emotion of the moment, was able at times to stand aside and see the whole episode objectively. It did not lose by this process anything of its essential quality, being rather enriched till this onlooker in Nicky had to admit that it was all very much worth while. This mood, however, was gone as soon as come, leaving him comfortless, unheroic, and the adventure unbeglamoured. More for company than for any strategic reason, he crawled on his belly towards the edge of the slope, not resting until he lay side by side with Tooley.

Tooley said: 'They've got some frogs or something down there. In the basket.'

It was too dark to discern what was in the basket, but the conjecture was so plausible, and so well supported by past experience, that Nicky shivered, feeling a little sick.

'What for?' he said.

The question was an idle one and was answered by the silence it deserved. Nicky knew as well as Tooley, as well as anyone, that 'a bit of fun with frogs' was one of the chief delights of blaggs. It was such things that constituted their blaggishness and made the very idea of them turn Nicky's stomach. As the silence lengthened he was aware of a sickness moving inside him. Finding suspense unbearable he moved forward several stealthy

inches and peered over the edge. The enemy, grouped at the bottom of the slope, were now clearly visible. One of their number was seated on an upturned basket, a straw in his mouth and something dark and alive in his hand. Three others stood by, watching, nudging, giggling, and encouraging him with obscene remarks. As the torture moved nearer its crisis Nicky knew that he could stay there no longer: he must go either backwards or forwards. At the same moment he heard Tooley whisper, close into his ear: 'Let's go and stop it. What do you say?' Nicky remembered that his right hand was clutching a large stone. Exultation filled him. The passive agony of watching was at an end.

'You armed?' he asked excitedly. And hardly waiting for an answer he struggled to his knees, gave a loud yell, and hurled his stone. He had aimed, having no thought for consequences, at the head of the Blagg-in-Chief, the fellow on the basket, but by happy chance his stone struck either the frog, so ending that bit of fun, or the hand that held the frog—he couldn't see which. There was immediately an outburst of screaming blasphemy. Nicky jumped to his feet recklessly exposing himself, a stone in each hand. The other blaggs, at sight of him, shouted to their leader: 'Geou on, Sid! Do 'im in, mate!' It seemed tacitly agreed that the quarrel was to be tried by single combat, but Nicky, having been companioned for many months with more experienced warriors than himself, knew better than to trust these others

to stand by and see fair play. The frog-torturer took a pace or two forward. 'You come dahn 'ere!' he said invitingly. 'And see what you'll blurry well git.' By way of extra inducement he promised to castrate Nicky by an exceptionally painful process. Nicky stood waiting. His heart pumped furiously. That savage anger being once and for all spent in violence, he had nothing now but his own spirit to support him.

'You'd better be off,' he advised. 'Better go home.'

The blagg, encouraged by this mild cool voice, in which the trembling could hardly be disguised, began steadily and quickly climbing the slope.

'Stand back,' cried Nicky, 'or you'll get another one.'

Yet now, lacking unequivocal provocation, he could not bring himself to fling, from his greater height, another stone at this enemy. He stood in an agony of indecision and saw with dismay that the three other blaggs were following close in the wake of their leader, growling like dogs. He had almost forgotten Tooley, who lay strangely passive in the grass.

And now the foremost blagg was all but upon him. ' 'It 'im in the blurry eye, Sid, and 'ave done with it!' shouted his gallant supporters. And at this cry the attack suddenly and dreadfully quickened its pace. It seemed to Nicky that monsters from all sides were bearing down upon him. But they were not bearing down, they were bearing up; and in that simple distinction lay his one advantage.

Nervously at last, rather than with deliberation or intention, Nicky flung his stones. Both went wide of the mark, and the four threatening forms coalesced and became, in this fast gathering darkness, an octopus of horror. Nicky clenched his fists and struck out wildly; and at the same time there came a tremendous shout at his side and Tooley, making enough noise for an army, was laying about him furiously with his heavy stick. Nicky's fist reached something soft; the enemy scattered and gave ground. In ten seconds they were back on level ground at the bottom of the slope. Here they rallied and began a circling movement. Nicky, dancing round his burly but less nimble opponent, and not daring to come within reach of his long arm, saw in a quick glance to his left that the three others were closing murderously on Tooley. It became essential therefore that this big fellow should somehow be disposed of. There was no time to lose. Nicky ceased his cavorting and stood quite still, waiting for his opponent, who thereupon took up the dance and in a series of lurches and feints, withdrawals and advances, came at him with both fists threatening. Came nearer, but not much nearer; the fellow was taking his time, and Nicky felt as perhaps a mouse feels when the cat's paw stretches towards it. Quite suddenly he got sick of waiting. He crouched, darted at his opponent, seized him round the hams, and flung him on his back. It was all over in a second. The body had fallen with a thud; Nicky paid no more attention to it, but turned at

once to the rescue of his friend, to whose back a redheaded dirty-nosed blagg was clinging in an effort to throw him, while the other two, now armed with roughhewn cudgels, were rushing at him from the front. Nicky, wasting no time, thrust his hand under the chin of the climber and gave it a sharp jerk backwards; the fellow fell limply into the grass. It was all unbelievably easy; but Nicky judged, and judged truly, that this set-back, if it came short of finally defeating the enemy, would but infuriate them the more. It was on the tip of his tongue to say: 'Quick, Tooley! Let's do a bunk for it!' But, as the two rascals picked themselves out of the grass, another idea visited him. He ran two paces up the slope, and making a trumpet of his hands called to the heights above: 'Cooee, Brown! Cooee, Jones! Blaggs here! Up and at 'em!' He was back in the battlefield in time to see Tooley making gestures of derision at four retreating figures. The battle was over.

Vociferous, mutually admiring, and relating over and over again the chief incidents of the late war, the two boys hurried homewards.

'I didn't half give him a wunner,' said Tooley. 'But three to one was a bit too thick, it was. Lucky you came along when you did, Pandy.'

'Funny the way my one flopped down,' said Nicky. 'Like as if he was dead, almost. Flabby lot they seem when you get at them.'

And so on, a feast of triumph, excited rather than boastful, and already coloured a degree more richly than life by the artist hand of memory.

They burst into song, a topical song of which Edward the Seventh's hoped-for coronation was the theme:

We'll be merry
Drinking whisky, wine and sherry,
We'll be merry
On Coronation Day.

'Walloping for me very likely,' said Tooley. 'Must be jolly late, you know.' They reached the end of Tooley's road and here their ways divided. 'Glad it's Saturday to-morrow, aren't you?'

'Yes,' said Nicky. 'You coming out, I s'pose?'

'You bet,' agreed Tooley. 'Have you got to help your pater in the morning?'

'Dessay I shall, but I'll be coming out some time 'fore dinner.'

'All right then. See you down Coppice.'

Nicky Pandervil walked thoughtfully on and turned into Farringay High Street. To his alarm he found Pandervil's Stores in darkness. It was after closing-time! Already conscious of being in disgrace he knocked at the house door his special knock—two short taps close together, pause, and two more. It was opened to him by Selina Bush the young woman of all work.

'Where you bin,' said Selina, 'this time of night? And just look at them dirty boots on my nice clean floor.'

Nicky estimated these reproaches at their true worth and significance, which was nothing at all.

He knew that he could get round Selina, and that Selina enjoyed being got round. 'Where's Ma?' said he. 'I say, Selina, is she in an awful wax about me?'

'Your Ma's ill-a-bed. Took worse she is, and calling people out of their names something dreadful. If it wasn't for your poor father I wouldn't stay another minute, and I don't care who knows it.'

To this recital the boy paid but little attention: he had heard it all so often before. That his mother was ill did not surprise or alarm him; she was always more or less ill. 'Where's Dad?' said he.

'In the kitchen at his supper,' answered Selina. 'Where else? And you just wash them hands, me lord, before you takes a single bite. Why, what's this?' She seized Nicky by the shoulders and drew him towards the jet of gaslight that dimly lit the little hall. Nicky, flinching under her scrutiny, became aware of his swollen underlip. He wriggled free and plunged into the kitchen to greet his father.

'Hullo, Dad!'

His father, thin, grey-whiskered, elderly, was seated at the kitchen table munching bread and dripping, with one eye on his newspaper, which was propped against the loaf. At his son's entry he looked up, peered over the rims of his reading spectacles, and gazed in mild surprise. It was his customary welcome, for he had never, it seemed, quite outlived his astonishment at being the be-

getter of so young and lively a thing as Nicky. Always when taken unawares, as now, he had the air of seeing the miracle for the first time.

'Well, my boy?' said he. Then, remembering something, he shook his head gravely. 'Where've you been all this time? Didn't I tell you you got to be in at seven o'clock sharp? And your lip's swollen, if I know anything.'

'Yes, but you see, Dad, me and Tooley got into an adventure . . .'

'I dessay you did,' said his father grimly. 'But that doesn't answer my question. Seven o'clock sharp means seven o'clock sharp, and it doesn't mean half-past eight, not by any manner of means. See?'

Nicky saw. He was silent. He took his place at the table without a word, but during the next five minutes he shot many a shy tentative glance at his father, who, having resumed his reading, contrived to appear not to notice these mute appeals, and made a stern show of opening out the newspaper, re-folding it at a new page, and holding it before his face.

Presently Nicky ventured to say: 'Hullo, Dad!'

'Well?' said his father.

'Tooley and me,' said Nicky, 'we had an adventure to-night down Coppice.'

'H'm!' Mr Pandervil did not raise his eyes from his reading. 'Down Coppice Piece?'

'Yes,' said Nicky. And then he achieved a phrase that had been running like music in his mind for

half an hour past. 'We had a brush with the blaggs, Dad.'

His father let fall the newspaper and leaned forward. 'A brush with the blaggs, eh? Let's hear about it, my boy.'

2

After that grim experience school was for a while a definitely pleasant part of life, not merely something neither good nor bad that was taken for granted. All the world, it seemed—a world comprising the thirty-three boys in Nicky's form—was talking of Tooley and Pandervil's marvellous exploit: how they had assaulted and put to flight a dozen large and dreadful blaggs. It was Hart who, in the excess of his devotion to Pandy, had multiplied the number of blaggs by three: not in a spirit of mere mendacity but because he was carried into a poetic flight by the exuberance of his feelings. Hart was a small, dark, dynamic creature, and Pandy's special friend in school and playground, Tooley being his boon companion only out of school hours. To Tooley, who was a Fifth Form boy, Nicky Pandervil was a mere kid, and it was only the accident of their homes being so near each other that drew them together. Tooley was a home friend; Hart, who lived two miles in the opposite direction, was a school friend; and Nicky, who had never given to this distinction, or to the paradox arising from it, a moment's thought, was yet aware of it. The paradox was that with

Tooley, who was merely 'a chap he knew', he was on visiting terms, whereas of the domestic life of Hart, his sworn chum, he knew and was content to know nothing at all.

'Did you hit him on the nose, Pandy?' Days had passed since the great event, but Hart had not yet tired of it.

'Well,' said Nicky, 'it *felt* like a nose, but I couldn't exactly see.'

'Good man!' Hart's eyes flashed in vicarious triumph. 'Did it bleed a good lot, d'you think?'

Unanswerable question. 'First it felt sort of hard and then it felt sort of soft, like . . . like bread and milk.'

'Oo!' cried Hart. 'P'raps you *broke* his beastly nose for him, hey?'

Nicky shook his head. 'I don't think so,' he said modestly. He was surprised and a little repelled by Hart's pleasure in the slaughter, though warmed by his admiration. 'There goes first bell.'

First bell was a warning tinkle; second bell, longer, was a summons. The noise in the playground did not perceptibly diminish, although plump Mr Glove, the youngest of the three masters, stood watchful in the schoolroom doorway with the bell in his hand ready to ring again.

'I say, Pandy!' A rawboned lad with red ears and prominent teeth came running up. 'Have you and Hart seen what old Mountain's been and written up in the lavvatry?'

'No,' said Nicky. 'What has he?'

Red Ears giggled. 'Come and have a squint at it.' Nicky made no response. 'Come on, Hart!'

'If it's so funny, tell us, can't you!' suggested Nicky. 'First bell's gone.'

'Oh come on, Pandy,' said Hart, pulling at his arm.

Old Mountain, whose age was twelve and a half, was still admiring his own handiwork when Nicky and Hart joined his audience. They pushed forward to get a clear view of the masterpiece. Nicky rather disliked Mountain, but he was curious to see what he had written. He saw, and made a grimace at what he saw. It was the usual thing and just like Mountain, thought Nicky; and he felt a twinge of shame for his now satisfied, or frustrated, curiosity. He suddenly wanted to take it out of that swanker Mountain, who was now adding to his laurels by reciting all the naughty words he knew.

'Do you call that funny! I don't,' said Nicky.

The recitation went on unchecked.

'I know something funnier than that,' said Nicky contemptuously. 'Got a pencil on you, Hart? Gimme!'

'Bell's gone!' shouted a boy at the edge of the crowd. But only the most timid were deterred from pressing forward to see what Pandervil was up to, him that had fought twenty blaggs down Coppice. 'What's he written?' Loud laughter in anticipation of delight. 'Let's have a look at what Pandy's put!'

Nicky's inscription was a great success with its

public. They howled and hooted and jeered, the jeers being directed against Mountain, who, flushed to the ears and scowling, was almost the last to read the writing on the wall. Nicky had written: *Mountin is a dirty tike.* A very sober statement of fact, but it passed for wit among Mountain's former admirers. It was, oh, terribly funny; and, in view of the respective sizes of the two boys, almost unbelievably rash on Pandy's part. Mountain was in the Lower Fifth and was a notorious arm-twister. The world waited expectantly for the slaughter of the innocent.

Mountain looked ugly and threatening. 'Pay you out for that, after!' he promised. Second bell had gone, and they were all in danger of being late for roll-call. That fact only, in the general opinion, had saved Pandervil from immediate extinction, although . . . after all, he had made pretty short work of those blaggs down Coppice Piece.

Eighteen boys were late for roll-call, the earliest of them arriving only in time to see the door of the schoolroom shut against them. They stood outside and trembled at thought of the wrath to come. Both Nicky and Hart were of the company of the damned. Inside the big yellow room, with its rows of worn desks, and its walls decorated with advertisements of the British Empire, Mr William Beddo, the principal, was calling the roll. This ceremony would be followed by prayers, after which—'Here he comes!' said Hart, and the sound of a turning key attracted all eyes to the door. Mr

Glove, a youngish man whose hands and face seemed to ooze out of his clothes as though he were made of underdone pastry, stood with pencil and notebook in hand to take the names of the delinquents as they filed past him up the steps. 'Ah, Pandervil, I thought *you* would be among the late ones! Wasn't it your little legs I saw gambolling across to the lavatory after first bell? I think so. I think so. And you too, Master Hart. We must learn to regulate our bodily functions with more discretion. Musn't we, Mountain? What, Benson, too! And Gray, and Oxenham, and Madders. Musn't we, Poole? I think so. I think so.' Wilting under the stern eye of Mr Beddo, who glared at them from his throne, the late boys, their names duly noted in Mr. Glove's little book, attached themselves to their respective classes. They despised Mr Glove more than they hated him, recognising his dreary facetiousness as but a poor imitation of another and more tolerable master, Mr Stagg, on whom this comparative newcomer was sedulously modelling himself. Mr Stagg had been at the school as long as even the oldest of the boys could remember, and it was he who took charge of Nicky's form for the first hour of this morning.

'Latin,' whispered Hart, who shared a double desk with Nicky. '*Amo, amas*, Stagg is an ass.'

The subject of this verse was at the moment occupied in writing on the blackboard a list of words and sentences for translation, and, pending that operation, the thirty-three boys of the Fourth Form were understood to be completing, by silent

concentration, their mastery of a set passage in Eutropius. But even those who took the lesson seriously were not silent, and their devotional murmurings provided such idlers as Nicky and Hart with ample cover for conversation, apart from the fact that in this big schoolroom, where four classes were conducted at once, there was inevitably an incessant buzz compounded of various small sounds.

'Wonder what we shall get for being late,' said Hart.

'Lines, I expect,' answered Nicky. 'Or else cubes.'

'One or the other, of course. Any donkey knows that.' Hart was genially scornful. 'Point is, which? I hope it's a cube, don't you?'

To be 'given a cube' meant that in expiation of his sin the sinner was required to find by simple multiplication the cube of a given number (containing four, five, or six figures, according to the degree of the sin), and to 'prove' his answer by division. Both with masters and boys, though for different reasons, cubes were a very popular form of punishment. All the masters set them; all the more intelligent of the boys made a point of preserving these fruits of detention; so that after a term or two it was only by a stroke of unusually bad luck that a boy was set a cube of which neither he nor his friends possessed a crib. Mr Glove was the master most addicted to repeating his cubes, because his malice prompted him to severity and he could not keep away from eights and nines.

Four nines and an eight was his favourite, and it was his victims' favourite, too. They could never be sure where the eight would fall, but they soon had all five possibilities worked out and ready to hand. Both Nicky and Hart were counting confidently on Mr Glove's ill nature. Their fear was that Wim himself might set the imposition. Wim, the headmaster, was so called on account of his signature in the monthly report-books—*Wm. Beddo.*

'Call me a donkey, would you!' said Nicky. 'All right, Hart my child. You wait. I'll owe you one for that.' With an air of grim determination, which meant nothing but that he was enjoying his game, he took a little black notebook from his pocket and licked the point of his pencil. 'I'll put it down in my book.'

'I do feel frightened!' mocked Hart.

Nicky's notebook contained a list of Men to be Paid Out, their names grouped, and their offences tabulated, under the misleading heading: 'Dr. to N. Pandervil.' A certain Richards, it appeared, had on the third day of February 1901 'called me a swanker'; but justice had speedily overtaken this fellow, for in the right-hand column there was the sinister remark, 'Paid out, 4 Feb. N.P.' Against Hart there were several entries, such as 'Kicked me in Gography', and, less specific, 'Wouldent stop mucking about with my ink-well'. These last offences were still unpunished, as indeed were the greater number here recorded. Nicky, with no attention to spare for Latin grammar (I regret to

say that he thought it silly to have twelve different ways of saying 'this', and no one had told him about the Romans), idly turned these private pages, in which were noted, not only these pretended grudges, a record as innocent of conscious humour as of any malice, but his scores at cricket, miscellaneous items of information concerning such things as Mount Everest, the Meridian, and Habeas Corpus, and a list of *Best Books that I have read* which included works by Ballantyne, Stevenson, Farrar, Annie S. Swan, Silas Hocking, Conan Doyle, Mrs. Craik, and Seton Merriman. They contained also a few scraps of doggerel, of which the couplet quoted by Hart was one.

Nicky during class was bounded on the left by a wall, on the right by Hart, and at his back by the chemistry cupboard, this last a piece of fine old oak in which were kept such test-tubes, beakers, and retorts as Mr Goff, the visiting science master, had not as yet broken for the entertainment of the boys, together with various substances in bottles of which he, and he only, knew the names. Nicky was not alone in believing his position to be one of exceptional security. In this corner, undetected by authority, he could talk, he could correspond with his friends, he could learn the deaf-and-dumb alphabet from Hart, he could even sing. And, in a discreet fashion, making himself audible only to his immediate neighbours, he did sing. His father privately thought him a musical genius, for no better reason than that he had a natural sense of harmony and habitually sang seconds. Richards,

whose back Nicky's pencil was at this moment prodding, could emit a rumbling noise that passed for bass; Benson who sat on Richards's right, just in front of Hart, was a master of simple melody; and these three constituted with Nicky himself 'the Choir', an institution, self-created and to many of its beneficiaries unknown, whose function it was to enliven the tedium of lessons like Latin and Algebra and English Grammar.

Richards, in response to the prodding, looked stealthily round. 'What's up?'

'Choir practice,' said Nicky, 'will now begin.'

'*Cave!*' whispered Hart. 'Stagg's looking.'

The four noses of the Choir were plunged into Eutropius. But in a moment or two Mr Stagg turned back to his blackboard, and Nicky tried again.

'No,' said Richards. ''Snot safe with Stagg. Wait till Chemistry.'

'Come on, Rich!' whispered Nicky urgently. 'I say, don't be a beastly rotter!' Richards, however, insisted on being a beastly rotter. He indulged his corrupt nature by repeating his refusal and then taking refuge in a silence from which no amount of prodding could dislodge him. 'All right,' said Nicky. 'I'll jolly well owe you one for that, Rich.'

He entered this new debt in his little book and was soon happy again. The Latin hour wore pleasantly away. The day had started well, and the afternoon held promise of the chemistry lesson, an orgy of delight and disorder that was the most

eagerly anticipated event of the week. Mr Goff was a shabby little man who wore a large square beard instead of a necktie. His frock coat was green with age; his cuffs were soiled; at the point of his thin nose there hung, in cold weather, a glistening pearl; his eyes, magnified by strong lenses, were big with childish surprise. His precarious dignity made him the more comical in the eyes of these young barbarians, who, being snobs by instinct and training, had neither pity nor respect for him. Where on earth did Wim Beddo pick the old man up? And how came such an obvious tramp to know anything about chemistry? No one knew. But if the boys were surprised at his learning, he was apparently no less so. Surprise, not unmixed with bewilderment, was his normal state. He was surprised when his experiments failed; and, with more cause, he was surprised when they succeeded. When by adding hydrogen to oxygen he produced water, his pleasure was—or to an adult spectator would have been—pathetic. When something unexpectedly exploded and the world became full of flying glass, his astonishment would have made angels weep for him. It did not make schoolboys weep. Indeed, the cruelty of schoolboys caused him most surprise of all. So noisy they were, so thoughtless, so rude—he could not understand such behaviour. He was like a child in a bear-pit. But the best of Mr Goff, from Nicky's point of view, was that, being for the most part absorbed in these distresses, he left Nicky and his circle to their musical and epistolary devices.

A quiet concert, a busy exchange of notes, the consumption of toffee (four ounces a penny at Ball's in the High Street), cutting a railway system on the desk-lid, and sketching faces in the back pages of an exercise book: these were, for Nicky, the delights associated with science.

'Give that notebook to me, Pandervil!'

It was Mr Stagg's voice, and Nicky, brutally roused from reverie, was aware of Mr Stagg in person standing within two yards of him. A slight sickness seized him. He burned with confusion and could utter no word.

And now the notebook was in Mr Stagg's hand, and Mr Stagg was turning its pages.

'Pandervil! Is this how we learn our Eutropius? Is this how we qualify for the battle of life? Is it, Pandervil?'

'No, sir!'

'How then?' inquired Mr Stagg. 'Is it rather in detention, when our little friends are released from school? Is it, Pandervil? I think so. I think so . . . But what's this? A modicum of Latin after all! Well, well, well!' Nicky's fear became suffocating. What he had most dreaded was about to happen. Mr Stagg read out relentlessly: '*Amo, amas*, Stagg is an ass. *Amas, amat*, my old tom-cat . . . And what comes next, Pandervil?'

What came next, in Nicky's imagination, was that he would be reported to Wim Beddo and publicly caned. He said nothing. He stared, speechless and helpless, at the lid of his desk. But Mr Stagg repeated his question. 'What comes

next? What comes after *amo, amas, amat,* Pandervil?'

'*Amamus, amatis* . . .'

'Precisely!' said Mr Stagg. '*Amo, amas,* Stagg is an ass. *Amas, amat,* my old tom-cat. Yours is a zoological muse, Pandervil. *Amat, amamus,* you can't blame us. *Amamus, amatis,* how bald his pate is! . . . How will that do, Pandervil?'

He glared at Nicky with grim friendliness. Nicky wanted to cry. He could not join, as yet, in the general laughter with which the class acknowledged Mr Stagg's little joke, a joke only half against himself, for Mr Stagg's hair, though grey, was plentiful. He had a crooked nose and a cleft chin; he presented an odd appearance by reason of his fierce eyebrows and the excessive height of his collar; but he was not bald, and the class therefore felt safe in laughing.

'To-night, Pandervil, in detention, I shall finish your verses for you. And you shall learn your Eutropius. I think so. I think so.'

This was the beginning of something that caused, in Hart and others, a good deal of perplexity and some indignation: Nicky's devotion, not merely to Mr Stagg—that could be forgiven, Mr Stagg being admittedly a decent old buffer—but even to Latin. And two years later he struggled desperately into the Sixth.

3

Egg Pandervil was now sixty-seven. Nicky was

his Benjamin. His three other children had never been to him what Nicky was—a consolation prize. Mabel and Bob were both married and had children of their own; and Harold, who after a bad beginning had become a great help in the shop, was understood to be courting one of the several young women who occupied his leisure evenings. These three were unimportant facts in Egg's life; the important ones were Nicky, whom he loved, and Carrie, whom he endured. He had ceased to think of his marriage as a disaster because he had ceased to think of his marriage; on Carrie he spent nowadays as little thought as, after a lifetime of endurance, a crippled man will spend on his deformity. Ten years before, and less, he had regarded her with incessant compassion and had suffered many a pang of unreasoned and undeserved self-reproach. But now such emotions stirred in him only when he remembered that she was still, whatever she might seem, a human creature and the object of his habitual affection. It stood to reason that a woman suffering from as many serious disorders as the doctor diagnosed in Carrie must be frequently in pain; yet it was certain that the reality came short of her pretensions. But was it certain? Was anything certain? Ah, there was the difficulty! All he knew was that he must do his best for her, and, every day, by the mercy of heaven, contrive to forget her for a quiet hour or so. In both endeavours he was loyally aided by Selina the Elp.

And if Egg, instinctively avoiding the subject,

thought seldom of his wife as a human being, Nicky seldom thought of his mother at all. A familiar part of life, yet a being monstrously unlike ordinary people, she was at once too near and too remote to engage even his curiosity. Of her mind he knew and guessed nothing. He did not know, for example, that by loving his father he had crushingly defeated the prime if unconscious purpose of her everlasting anger. In the far-off days before she had become permanently bedridden he had learned to avoid her, and he nowadays paid her in her bedroom only such duty visits as she demanded or his father enjoined. His brothers, too, were little more than acquaintances. Bob was tremendously old and had a moustache and a wife; and Harold, a man of twenty-four or so, spent very little time at home. As for Mrs Bob, of whom people whispered behind her back that she had once been a skivvy (like Sleena, thought Nicky), she was such a lady, so well dressed and polite, that it seemed a piece of cheek to be calling her Kitty, even though she was one's sister-in-law. And Mabel, his real sister, was merely a middle-aged woman who insisted on kissing him whenever she came or went. Home, for Nicky, meant Dad and Sleena, with Ma as a calamitous background. It meant, in addition to these, all friends and activities that were not either of the school or of the chapel. Sunday, a day spent in chapel and Sunday School, with a midday interval for the consumption of beef and Yorkshire pudding, constituted a category in itself, a curious

break in the continuity of ordinary existence. It had not escaped Nicky's attention that there were worlds within his world. Home was different from school, school was different from Sunday; these were three of many circles contained within the larger circle of his consciousness, and he alone, it seemed, possessed the mysterious power of stepping out of one and into another. Other boys experienced Sunday, perhaps, but not his Sunday—a notion, this, quite independent of the accident that not one of his schoolfellows happened to be of the Ebenezerite persuasion. And if in fact these worlds did sometimes chance to impinge one upon the other, the effect, to Nicky's perception, was so queerly incongruous as only to emphasise their essential separateness. It was as if the characters of one story had strayed into another, as if bits of R. M. Ballantyne had become absurdly entangled with John Halifax Gentleman. This confusion seldom occurred, because in fact things could not, try as they might, sustain their reality for Nicky in more than one of his worlds; the failure was exemplified in Ralph Tooley, who, being a near neighbour, a domestic friend, became something quite different when he was within the precincts of the school, something at best a stranger, at worst a mere hypothesis. If this proved anything, it proved, not that there was but one world, but that there were two Tooleys, a school Tooley and a home Tooley. I do not pretend that Nicky got so far in fantasy as this, or that his mind intellectualized its sensations. But it did, wittingly or unwittingly, make idle

pictures of them, and sometimes, half dreaming, he played with the pretence that there were three Nickies, or more, one for each of these worlds that he inhabited. He told, and could have told, such fancies to no one. Though recurrent, they were the most transitory, the most elusive wisps of sensation; never concrete enough for thought, too light and brief to leave legible mark on the mind that from time to time entertained them, they were secrets not only from others but from himself.

A problem that more actively engaged him, when he had time or thought to spare from the strenuous business of being a schoolboy, which meant doing homework, playing games, placating or outwitting masters, and twice a day traversing the ground to and from Wim Beddo's Select Academy, was concerned with the mysterious behaviour of Harold and Selina, whom, one Sunday afternoon at a time when he was thought to be at Sunday School, he overheard exchanging urgent whispers behind the closed door of the pantry. At first innocently curious, then less innocently so, he listened with held breath. The man's voice was commanding, cajoling, entreating; the woman's, fearful, yet with a queer note that half-contradicted the fear. Fantastic conjectures, things without form or face, loomed in Nicky's excited brain. He felt ashamed of listening, yet could not drag himself away. This hidden thing attracted him, irresistibly, against his will, just as Mountain's audacious scripture on the lavatory wall had (until he read it) attracted him two years ago. He was

alight with elemental curiosity. What was happening behind that closed door? He could not imagine. He was densely ignorant. But instinct whispered that the secret held for him a profound significance. Fancy rioted; he shuddered, feeling unclean; but his hunger and thirst for the forbidden knowledge outlived this moment of shame. What is it, what is it? his mind persisted. It's something like what that beast Bligh drew . . . no, it can't be that. What is it? It's something awful or Dad woulduv told me when I asked him. What can it be? Can it be that . . . or that . . . or . . . I wonder what it is. Something *dirty*. . . . Of that much he felt certain; round that central idea his thoughts fluttered in sick, eager, frustrated curiosity.

They were coming out! The sight of the turning door-handle broke the evil spell. His limbs were unlocked, and he tiptoed stealthily away to think and dream and frighten himself with a variety of pictures that included one of his brother Harold in prison for years and years. Was it something they put you in prison for? It surely was. It was the worst thing that anyone could do, worse than murder, or else Dad would have told him about it when he had asked so urgently. But Dad, instead of telling him, had answered vaguely, hastily, something about when he was older, all in good time. Good time was no time; he wanted to know now.

His need to know, since Harold was involved in this matter, became clamorous, imperative; and at

last, in desperation, he asked Selina herself. For Selina was not a lady. She was a commonplace familiar person who had been, and was still, something of a mother to him. In his earlier childhood she had bathed him and put him to bed, and now that he was older she was a most comfortable person to talk to, for when she wasn't cross she talked with neither ceremony nor authority, as to an equal. And, most important of all, she knew. She could not pretend to ignorance, could not evade his questions; for if necessary he would frighten her into telling him. She was twenty-nine to his fourteen, but he could frighten her this time. In his determination to get at the heart of the mystery he set aside all tender scruples.

'Sleena, what was it you and Harold were talking about in the pantry last Sunday?'

The change in Selina effected by this simple question was frightening. Taken quite unawares she almost snarled in her terror, with bared teeth and widened eyes. 'Whadja mean, talking about in the pantry! Whadja mean!'

Frightened, trembling, Nicky stuck to his guns. 'You thought I was at Sunday School, but I wasn't. I just went for a walk and then came back home to have a read. And I heard you'n Harold——'

'O Gaw!' exclaimed Selina. 'You bin spying on us, 'ave you? Silly young fool 'e was. I told 'im it wasn't safe.' Dull-eyed now, she stared at Nicky miserably. 'Kept your mouf shut, 'ave you? Not bin and told anyone?'

Nicky was offended. 'What d'you take me for?

I'm not a sneak, thank you. Besides, I don't know anything to tell. I don't know anything.' After a pause he repeated: 'I don't know anything about . . . all that. No one'll tell me. I'm sick of not knowing. I only think things and . . . dream things.'

Selina looked at the boy with a new bright interest. 'What things, ducky?'

'You needn't call me those baby names any longer. I'm not a beastly baby.'

'All right, ducky! What things?' she repeated coaxingly. 'Come and tell Sleena all about it, there's a lamb.'

He hesitated. But after all it was only old Sleena; and, whatever had happened in the pantry, she was still the same Sleena, familiar and ordinary and easy to talk to. He decided to bargain with her. 'If I tell you, will you tell me?'

The compact was made, the confidences exchanged, the dreams told and interpreted. In his eagerness to know, Nicky lost all sense of shyness or shame; in her readiness to tell, Selina quite forgot the polite art of avoiding plain speech. She told him all that he wanted to know, and more than all; and it was clear even to himself that she was tremendously enjoying the wonder and horror, the breathless hot-eyed attention, with which he listened. For perhaps the first time in her life she held the centre of the stage and had a perfectly responsive audience on whose mind she could play whatever wild tune she chose. She was excited, dangerously, with her sense of sudden power. But

when she at last approached her personal confession she remembered to demand the usual ritual promise.

'You'll never tell? Not anyone!'

'Course not,' said Nicky.

'Say: Cut me froat, wishermer die!'

'Cut me throat, wishermer die!' intoned Nicky. 'But,' he added, in a voice of utter dejection, 'you needn't bother to tell me any more, Sleena. I know everything now.'

'*That* you don't!' returned Selina. 'Not by a long way, ducky. Me and Harold——'

'Oh shut up about it, do!' Nicky had had an overdose of knowledge. His curiosity was satisfied, and his life, he thought, was spoilt. It was horrible, horrible, this nasty secret thing that was secret from him no longer. Life was horrible, ugly; it didn't bear thinking about. Men, above all, were beastly; and he himself would soon be a man. It was clear, too clear, that he would soon be a man. He thought suddenly of his parents, and shuddered. Even Dad. . . . But that thought pulled him up; there was something here that would not square with his raw puritanism. He was learning quickly.

'Of course,' said Selina, with an arm round his shoulder, and peering earnestly into his face, 'he wouldn't do it to jest anyone, Harold wouldn't!' She spoke proudly, the chosen concubine.

Nicky shrugged himself free and stood up. 'It's beastly all the same. It's . . . wicked.' He stared with new curiosity at Selina, now suddenly

revealed as a wicked woman. She looked much the same as usual: homely, good-natured, a bit common (he thought) but he was used to her and had always more or less liked her. The puzzling thing was that he more or less liked her even now. 'I'm going down Coppice,' he said. He must think this thing out alone.

'He wouldn't do it to jest anyone,' reiterated Selina. . . .

After this conversation Nicky was vaguely wretched for days, and he hated Harold so much that he couldn't remain in the same room with him. Harold had never occupied an important place in his affections; being ten years older he practised the authority of a father without a father's gentleness; and certainly Egg, from the first, had been more of a brother to Nicky than ever Harold had been. But now, for a while, Nicky's indifference gave way to active dislike; the thought of Harold and Selina was poison to him, a poison that permeated all his sexual imaginings. This grotesque thing he had discovered was worse than Mountain's lavatory humour, worse even than the pictures that that beast Bligh was so fond of drawing and showing round the class, worse than anything. . . . Yet, as time passed, and the new knowledge gradually lost its newness, a gleam of light visited his sick heart, a heaven-sent suspicion that this truth was not the whole truth, that perhaps something remained untold that would make all the difference between ugliness and beauty. He had read a good deal about love; for lately, quite abandoning

Ballantyne and his kind, he had been borrowing books, on his father's ticket, from the Free Library: sentimental novels, from which, however, he got almost as much perplexity as entertainment. The fantastic world these novels offered him was a welcome change from African jungles and Canadian snows, and the scene in which Richard Strangeways is released from his betrothal vows by noble Edna Howard moved him profoundly; wrung his heart, brought tears to his eyes, made him wonder how on earth, after that, Richard could go off and say to the beautiful second girl of his choice: 'Little woman, you have made me the happiest man in the world.' The story ended happily enough for Richard, the wedding-bells of the last chapter being followed, at a discreet distance, by an epilogue for the accommodation of a little Richard; but it left Nicky grieving, yearning, over sweet sad Edna Howard. He fell pensively in love with Edna Howard; in his mind he lived that scene over and over again, with himself in the place of Richard, but behaving, in the end, not at all as Richard had behaved. He begged Edna's forgiveness; he whispered (in the solitude and darkness of his bedroom) endearments that, in daylight, he blushed to remember; and she received back her ring and allowed him to hold her in his arms. Yes, he had known romance; he was not quite a stranger to love; the emotion induced in him by that less than nothing, that dream within a dream, was as authentic, in its degree, as Antony's passion for Cleopatra. Innocent and ardent, it had

lived its brief span nourished on nothing more substantial than the memory of a voice heard only in imagination. A voice incomparably sweet and grave and tender, a heart brimmed with charity: that was the sum of Edna Howard. He never quite succeeded in imagining a face for her.

To this fond fancy his mind now returned, in quest of some key that should release him from his present perplexity. The girls he saw in the flesh were nothing; not one of them ever entered the luminous haze of his reveries, and in the daylight of ordinary active existence he was ready enough to acquiesce in the verdict of his contemporaries, that love—'love and kissing and all that'—was a softy's game, unworthy of a fellow's attention. But even while paying tribute to this conventional belief he half-questioned its sincerity, for everyone in the Sixth knew that Lawson, for one, and Prothero, for another, were in the habit of meeting girls from the High School in Windermere Avenue; and Bateman, boldest of all, made a practice of walking home from the Saturday cricket matches in the company of Hudson's haughty sister. Nicky couldn't but admire Bateman, envying him if not his conquest certainly his courage, his audacity, and above all his singular indifference to public opinion. Bateman, however, was sixteen and possessed several sisters of his own: two facts which, taken in conjunction, probably made all the difference, thought Nicky. In Wim Beddo's Academy the name of Eileen Hudson was a powerful spell: a joke, if you like, but also the

symbol of a dawning aspiration. They were all afraid of her except the dashing, well-mannered Bateman; and he, I dare say, was more afraid than any of them. To Nicky, who had chanced to observe the hero slowly taking off his pads in the pavilion and visibly nerving himself for the greater battle that was to come, some hint of this paradox was revealed. It was clearly a tremendous enterprise, this talking to a girl; and the reward must surely be commensurate with the dangers. He sometimes wished that Eileen had possessed a plain sister, less alarmingly neat and clean, less cool and ladylike, for himself—when nobody was looking—to practise on. He wondered if Bateman had ever kissed Eileen. It seemed impossible, and yet. . . . He did not need telling, by Bateman or anyone else, that to kiss someone, someone quite young who was neither aunt nor cousin, would be the most marvellous, the most revealing thing that could ever happen. The thought was a leaping flame in him.

Ugly things came sometimes to work havoc in his thoughts, and might, with silence aiding, have left an enduring mark upon him had he not chanced at this time to discover poetry, and a poetry that was somehow different from Marmion, which, with the capable assistance of Mr Glove, they had 'done' very thoroughly at school. Despite Mr Glove's endeavours Nicky liked Scott's verse, finding it 'not so dry' as the prose of the Waverley Novels; and he shared with Hart a special affection for The Lay of the Last Minstrel, which,

because Mr Glove had never been heard to mention it, they both greatly preferred to Marmion. Rhyme and metre, the more regular the better, he found immensely satisfying and exciting. 'The way was long, the wind was cold,'—this prologue he could recite, in private, from beginning to end, and he always remembered to say 'His tuneful brethren all were dead,' in spite of a natural tendency to put the 'all' in the wrong place. These memorizing feats were performed night by night in his little box of a bedroom, of which his father, who himself had had to share a bedroom for some forty years, had been so pleased to give him the sole possession. Learning verses while he undressed for bed helped to keep his mind off ugly fancies—derived from the tales of Poe—that had sometimes made going to bed a terror and going to sleep a thing to be fought against. He had good reason, then, for gratitude to Scott; but now he forgot that debt in the contracting of a new one. Sixpence, two weeks' pocket money, had bought for him, it seemed, the key of paradise itself: a little red-covered volume in Cassell's National Library containing a selection from Tennyson. The wonder of that revelation! Marvellous that by adding word to word and line to line such music and such colour could be wrought! He was ripe for Tennyson, for Tennyson and no other. That pensive melancholy soothed his adolescent agitations; the smooth and shining verse carried his dreams upon its surface; and the story of King Arthur's death marched with trumpets in his mind.

He suffered and exulted; his eyes shone for Mariana; he was a Lotus Eater, visiting the land 'in which it seemèd always afternoon'; in mournful rapture he waited for Maud in that scent-laden garden that might have been designed for him alone, so exactly did it match his mood. In time the glory of Tennyson waned, being eclipsed by a greater glory, a purer magic, Coleridge. When he came to this:

The moving moon went up the sky
And nowhere did abide,
Softly she was going up. . . .

at the third line he paused and listened, tasting a pure delight; and, like the tragic lovers of Dante's vision, he read no more that day.

These events, first Tennyson, then the Coleridge of The Ancient Mariner, were among the great events of Nicky's adolescence. And this profoundly private life did not at all conflict with his life at school. He and his fellows of the Sixth experienced every enthusiasm proper to their age except an enthusiasm for learning. In the wake of tired Mr Stagg they ploughed three times through the sixth book of the Aeneid without ever being allowed to suspect that Virgil was anything more than a school text-book designed to exhibit the perversities of Latin syntax. Wim Beddo's having a strong commercial bias, Greek was no part of the curriculum; but Mr Beddo himself would engage to spoil Homer for you as effectually as Mr Stagg

was spoiling Virgil, were your parents so eccentric as to have you take Greek instead of Shorthand or Book-keeping. But these things, at best, were not matters in which the boys themselves took any official interest. Nicky and his friends had more important things to think about: such things as marbles; bullseye-lanterns; conkers; top-spinning tournaments; keeping white mice, unseen but not imperceptible, in their school-desks; and school-magazines. In winter they derived much spiritual satisfaction from home-made hand-warmers: perforated cigarette-tins filled with glowing touch-wood; and at seasons the more imaginative spirits, greatly to the scorn of the Farringay Grammar Sops, went daily to and from school bowling iron hoops which they called among themselves their steeds and discussed with high equestrian enthusiasm, strutting up and down the playground with 'skimmers' pendent from lapels or carried as riding-crops. Of all these epidemics, journalism was the most congenial to Nicky. His serial story, Scalpo the Head-hunter, gave great satisfaction, especially to its author, though it did not get further than the third instalment, which ended in this fashion: '"Ye feel hungry doubtless," said Scalpo, "but we have nought to offer ye I fear me, some of ye must come with me to find something." A loud murmur of approval greeted the Chief's speech, for he was a man of few words.'

With all these matters to occupy him, Nicky paid little attention to the daily misery of his father's

married life. He was aware of it rather as a pervading atmosphere than as an active poisoner of happiness. He was sorry for his father, but he had never taken the final step in sympathy of getting imaginatively into his father's shoes. From this ultimate pain he was protected by Egg himself, who, for his own sake as well as for the boy's, revealed always his sunniest side to Nicky, being heartily grateful to have someone near him who was not visibly oppressed by the shadow in the house.

4

Nicky paused on the landing to listen to his mother's voice. He was reluctant to approach her door.

'Yes, Mother. All right. I'll tell him.'

He went downstairs and entered the little, permanently crowded parlour. Even when it was empty of people it was crowded. The chairs and tables and vases and lustres and even the great cabbage roses on the wall—these were a sufficient host. Nicky stood undismayed in the midst of this lumber.

'Mother's dying again,' he remarked.

Egg responded with a tut-tutting noise. 'That's not the way to speak of y'r mother, my boy! I'm surprised at you. Does she want me?'

'Yes. Told me to tell you,' mumbled Nicky, in confusion.

His confusion was occasioned partly by his father's rebuke, but more by the fact—which he

had only just noticed—that the room contained Harold and a stranger. Worse than that, the stranger was a young woman.

Egg said: 'Come along, my boy. Come and say how d'ye do to Miss Colebrook. She won't bite you.'

Nicky, covered in blushes, stumbled forward and shook hands with Miss Colebrook, Harold watching the ceremony with an uneasy, half-derisive grin. And Egg, modelling himself for a moment on his brother Algernon, who had a word for every occasion, forced himself to add that Lily was to be one of the family. 'Sister for you, my boy. . . . Well, I must go and see what Mother wants.'

So that was it! That was the meaning of this strangely formal gathering in the parlour: Harold had gone and got engaged. And this was what an engaged couple looked like. Nicky's glance, shyly curious, wavered from one face to the other. The girl looked pretty and defiant, and Harold looked sheepish. Now what was the proper thing to say to them? Nicky could think of nothing except his wish to get away.

'Well, if you'll excuse me . . . promised to meet a chap down Coppice this evening.'

But still he lingered, and at this moment a queer thought entered his mind and would not be expelled; and, as if in answer to that queer thought, Selina, the subject of it, abruptly entered the room.

'I expect the lady ud like a cup of tea, wouldn't she, 'Arold?'

A cup of tea at half past six o'clock—why?

Harold, staring, gaping, managed to say: 'Thanks very much. Spect she would.'

The moment he had spoken, by the curl of Selina's lip and the blazing of her eyes Harold knew, Nicky knew, perhaps the astonished Lily half-knew, that he had fallen into the crudest trap. Selina waited, her eyes fixed on Harold, making the most of this her last moment. 'Would she reely now, Harold darling! Then she can jest set about getting it 'erself. See? And not in my kitchen neither. See?'

Selina was gone, leaving havoc behind her; and at the same moment Egg returned from his visit upstairs. 'Nicky, you run off to the doctor. Your mother's not so well to-night. Say Mr Pandervil's compliments and will he please come round soon's he can.'

Egg's voice was calm and unhurried. He had lived through too many of these crises to have credulity to spare for this one. His wife in a weary sighing voice had said: 'I think I'm going to die, Eggie!' And he had answered patiently: 'Very well, my dear. I'll send for the doctor.' An answer quite innocent of irony, as of unkindness, and one he had made, on like occasions, a score of times before. True, he was anxious; but anxiety had become his normal state, and he was not too much preoccupied to say civil things to Lily, who now, eager and agitated, rose to say she must go.

She went, and Harold with her. Egg was left alone with his thoughts. But he preferred his newspaper, which he had been too busy to read

properly during the day. It was not the exciting reading it had been a year or two before, during the Boer War; but, what with this and that and the other, there was always some odd little thing happening. Egg took pleasure in the odd little things, preferring them to murders and divorces and what Mr Balfour said about Tariff Reform. 'That plaintiff's dog had eaten his artificial teeth was the allegation made by John Tweed, warehouseman, 37, of 229B Maiden Avenue, Camberwell, yesterday at the Old Bailey when charged with alleged assault with intent to cause grievous bodily harm to Henry Westerman, bank clerk, 29 . . .' This was the sort of thing that took a man's mind off his troubles; it was better than the serial story, because it set you thinking and making up ridiculous stories of your own, and better far than the pompous leading articles which could not in less than a column contrive to call the other side an ass.

'Doctor's out, Dad.' It was Nicky come back.

'Leave a message?' asked Egg.

'Yes. Expect him any minute, they said.'

'Good boy,' said Egg. 'Done your homework?' Nicky shook his head. 'Cut along and do it then. What is it to-night?'

'Algebra and Latin. Oh, and French.'

Egg stared his admiration. 'All that! Ah, you know a deal too much for me, Nicky. Capes of Europe and nine square feet one square yard was as far as ever *I* got. Off you go now, or it'll be bedtime before you start.'

Egg returned to his newspaper. He wished the doctor would come, and so relieve him of this carefully suppressed uneasiness, this little aching sense of responsibility. He was not really alarmed: by this time he knew better than to take his wife's melodrama seriously; but he wished the doctor would come. Not alarmed, because if there was one thing certain in this world it was that Carrie would outlast him, just as her mother had outlasted the old man. Tough as pig iron these Noom women were, in spite of what they told you! Old Mother Noom, who at Carrie's age should have been dead three times over according to her own account, went on till well past eighty, and would be going strong still, thought Egg, if she hadn't chanced to fall downstairs. One of his clearest memories was of Mrs Noom's first deathbed scene, when she had frightened everyone in the house, her poor little husband most of all, by declaring that her end was at hand, and Egg himself, not much more than a boy at the time, he thought, had had to read a bit of the Bible to her. Carrie, thank heaven, had never played tricks like that; but Carrie was her mother's daughter all the same, and knew well, none better, how to make the most of such pains as she had. Carrie was ill now: not a doubt of that. But had she been as well as well, you'd a never got her to admit it, she was that stubborn, like as if she was afraid of losing the advantage of you. Tearing her insides about with those dratted pills didn't do her any good if you ask me, muttered Egg, conducting an argument in

his mind with some second self. But she *would* take 'em, he insisted, disclaiming responsibility; again and again, no matter what *I* said. Might jest as well have talked to a post, I might. If I'd a had *my* way there'd never have been any need for sech things; but there it is, no use grumbling. . . . He wished the doctor would come. He looked at his watch, which told him that more than an hour had passed since his visit to Carrie. Better go and have a look, he thought; and with the thought came a picture of the bedroom in which Carrie was now lying, the very bedroom and the very bed in which her mother had feigned death and her father had died, containing the same yellow wardrobe, the same ottoman, the same ugly and everlasting chest of drawers so placed as to exclude such little light as the window admitted. Egg let fall his newspaper. Better go and cheer her up a bit till the doctor comes.

As soon as he entered the room he knew himself alone in it. Something, some queer difference, told him that what the bed contained was no longer Carrie. He moved forward on his toes with the sensation of treading in a void. The silence of the room deafened him. He knew; and yet when, as he stared into that face, the words formed in his mind she is dead she is dead, it was as if he had not known until this dread revealing moment. She can't be dead, not Carrie . . . not dead! This was Carrie, and deep-rooted habit would not let him think of her as dead. In a moment that glassy look would fade from the staring eyes, and Carrie

would say something to him, something tart no doubt, but what did that matter? Anything was better than nothing; anything was better than this violent wrench at the mind, this cruel sudden assault on a habit that had grown into him and become part of himself. He put out a trembling hand and touched her. But it was useless to fight; the new habit was gaining strength; he resisted it no longer, but prayed that he might be given courage to close the eyes before young Nicky had a chance of seeing them and reading in them the universal doom . . . and when this had been accomplished it was as if Carrie lay sleeping, a younger Carrie utterly and coldly at peace. Egg, awe-struck by this specious dignity, turned his face away, remembering the young girl she had once been, and how, downstairs in the kitchen, he had kissed her for the first time. Memories crowded in upon him, but though as he moved to the door his lips were saying soundlessly Poor Carrie poor Carrie, the grief that surged in him was not for Carrie, not for himself, but for something he knew not what.

He tiptoed downstairs calling softly: 'Nicky! Nicky my boy.'

An irrational agitation seized him. He must call someone, he must get help, he must give the alarm. What foolishness, he thought the next instant. There's no help now, and no hurry. And at the realization that never again would there be any hurry on Carrie's account, an immense burden was lifted from his life; yet at this moment he would

have given anything to have that burden back in exchange for the new one he had just acquired.

Nicky met him at the foot of the stairs. 'Yes, Dad?'

'It's your mother,' said Egg. He put a hand on Nicky's shoulder to steady himself, and sat down on the lowest stair, bowing his head.

'What's the matter, Dad? Mother bad?'

'She's dead, my boy. I feel . . . a little poorly.'

Nicky stared at the bald patch on his father's head, and tried to understand what he had heard. It meant that there was a dead body in the house. He shuddered, and tears welled into his eyes. A big fellow now, close on fifteen; but he was frightened, and the sight of his father stricken and bowed thrust sharply at his heart. To comfort and be comforted he fell on his knees and put his arms round Egg's neck, and in the warmth of that embrace the same thought came to each: What if it had been you! For a few moments they remained so, clinging desperately to all they possessed.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

PLANS AND HOPES

1

THE doctor appointed by the City and Provinces Bank to examine candidates for their service was a tall, lantern-jawed gentleman of forty. When he had finished with Nicky he cleared his throat, shook his head, and remarked: 'I'm afraid . . . I'm rather afraid . . . not very robust . . . open-air life.' So saying he seized each of the two Pandervils by an arm and marched them towards the door. At the door he warmly shook hands with them both. 'Good day! Good day!'

Nicky and Egg walked down the street. Egg was bewildered. 'What's the meaning of that, Nicky? It's beyond me.'

'It means,' said Nicky, 'that I'm not brawny enough to be a bank clerk, Dad. Did you notice how upset he was when he took my chest measurement?'

'But bless my soul . . .'

Seeing that Egg was taking the disappointment to heart, Nicky attempted gaiety. 'Ah, you don't understand, Dad. Jolly strenuous life in a bank. Takes a chap with big biceps to add up figures all day. You ought to hear what old Hart says.

He says the mere sight of a ledger makes him tired. That just shows you.'

His father ignored these remarks. 'It's a real worry, that's what it is. Here's me been and given you a good education, better than your brothers by a long chalk, and now it's all to be wasted as I see things. Not robust enough! Not robust enough to sit on your bottom in an office all day. What's the donkey *mean?* I never heard such a thing.'

'It's the widows, Dad,' explained Nicky.

Egg looked across. He stared. 'What's *widows* to do with it?'

'The widows and orphans. My little lot. You didn't know I'd got any, did you? No more did I. But *he* knows, that doctor johnny knows. He has to think of everything, don't you see? And if I die young, muscular strain or something, they've got my widows on their hands.'

'Such a nice safe profession 'twould a bin,' said Egg sadly. 'Money goes on just the same even when you're ill. Now I've never bin ill. Not to *say* ill. Couldn't afford it. . . . I'm sure I don't know what to do with you. I'm fair beaten.'

Not to anyone else would Egg have admitted himself 'fair beaten'; and a year ago he would not have admitted it even to Nicky. But he was conscious nowadays of being not quite the man he had been. He was nearing seventy; looking back it seemed to him that all his life he had been consistently denied whatever he had at any time chanced to set his heart on, and at last his stock of patience had run out. Whatever he wanted he

must have now or never; there wasn't much time left. Above all things he wanted to see Nicky comfortably settled in a good safe job, and married—if that wasn't too much to hope—to the right kind of girl. If I can only last another ten years, thought Egg, I can see the boy launched in the world. Nicky was now seventeen: a wonderful age, a dangerous age, thought the old man, who remembered something—not very much but something—of his own young manhood spent in Mershire on his father's farm. Why, I couldn't a bin moren twenty three or four when I left home. It was true; nevertheless he felt that he had never been really young after leaving Mershire, after that cruel bit of a love affair of his. Ignorant and raw perhaps, but not young. He had forgotten much of that affair, and he could not for the life of him remember the girl's face; but he remembered how, after her going, the beauty of his native shire had been an intolerable burden to him, every responsive pulse of joy being turned instantly to pain by the agony of recalling the heaven he had lost. The air caressed him with her hands; birds called with her voice; a starlit sky, with the great moon moving up, was become but a cruel counterfeit of hours shared with her in the orchard. The very sunlight had stabbed at him with intimations of a vanished glory, so that his heart was an inexhaustible fountain of pain. . . . It was very different now, very dim and far away, as though it had all happened to someone else. He no longer felt the emotion: he remembered it, as

one remembers an old tale. And he hoped with all his heart that Nicky would be luckier than ever he had been. This rheumatism had worried him increasingly of late; it had shortened his temper and caused him twinges of fear as well as pain. He could not bear the idea of dying yet, with Nicky only seventeen. That girl he had loved, she would be an old lady now, white-haired, feeble perhaps, or perhaps dead; and with this thought the feeling came to Egg Pandervil that he himself had lived too long. The show was over for him, and all his friends were gone. Pummice gone, Farthing gone, old Miss Hunt of the Post Office gone; and the High Street thronged with strange faces. Every death had brought his own end nearer in imagination, Carrie's most of all; and every death, even Carrie's at first, had made life a little less worth living. These bustling young people—he was out of touch with them. Even Nicky was more reserved with him than he had been as a child.

Carrie's death had shaken Egg and changed him; that change was still going on, and he had not yet grasped all its meaning. He had freedom at last, but to what end? Freedom to read the newspaper without fear of interruption from upstairs, that was what it amounted to. The incomparable gift had come too late: he was used up, worn out. And the new habit was difficult to learn: it demanded unceasing vigilance. Many a time during those first weeks he was shaken with surprise to find the bedroom empty when he entered it at night; and, waking in the early morn-

ing, it was strange, not to hear Carrie's loud breathing, strange not to be compelled to listen, with quivering nerves, to the singing kettle in Carrie's nose. How he had hated that sound! In retrospect he hated it still, but he was none the less discomforted by its absence. He began to think that it was this house that oppressed him, and to toy with vague impossible plans for getting away from it. But were they so impossible? Harold was now a competent enough grocer, and willing, it seemed, to marry and settle down.

'Open-air life he said, didn't he?'

'Who?' Nicky emerged from a reverie.

'That doctor. Said you ought to have an open-air life.'

'Believe he did.'

'Might do worse than farming,' suggested Egg tentatively.

'Umph!' Nicky was unresponsive.

'Used to be mad about it when you were a little chap,' said Egg. 'Always asking me about the farm, you were. Pigs an' geese, eh? '

'I don't know,' said Nicky. 'It's all right, I suppose.'

'Well, is there anything else you wanta do?' Egg spoke patiently, hiding his disappointment. 'Anything in y'r mind?'

Nicky wondered whether this was the moment for speaking about that half-finished epic locked in his desk at home. He decided it was not. 'No. Haven't thought much about it. I always supposed it would be a bank or something. Wants

thinking over, doesn't it? I don't know.'

'Of course,' admitted Egg, 'farming needs capital. . . . And I haven't got any capital,' he added thoughtfully. 'Not likely. P'raps y'r Uncle Algy'll be able to suggest something. He's full of ideas, he is. Always was.'

'He'll want to make an auctioneer of me,' said Nicky. 'I'd rather not, if you don't mind.'

'Wonderful how he goes on, y'r Uncle Algy. A tidy bit older than me, y' know. And a martyr to gout these *five* years. How'd it be to run over and see him, Nicky?'

Nicky looked at his father without replying. Egg, reading that look, felt his heart sink within him; for it was evident that the boy did not share this fancy of his for farming. The wonder of it, the magic, the bridge across half a century of wasted time—Nicky was blind to this.

'Of course'—Egg shrugged his shoulders—'you must do as you like, my boy. No good putting you to something you hate. I know that well enough.'

Nicky was silent. And his father could not bring himself to say more. Without speaking they turned into a cheap restaurant and ordered poached eggs on toast. A battle was raging in Nicky's heart; he wanted to cry. Presently he remarked, in as easy a tone as he could muster: 'I daresay farming'll be rather a lark, once I get to know a bit about it. What do you think, Dad?'

2

With Nicky away the house was quiet indeed; and the ghost of Nicky—for Nicky was now learning to farm under the guidance of a Mershireman named Crabbe—replaced that of Carrie. For Egg the experience was almost in its effect a suspension of life, a pause between two periods, an empty transition from the existence he had known to something as yet unguessed that was to follow. He was waiting for this something to happen. Meanwhile he became extravagantly interested in the movements of the postman, and cherished his son's letters like a lover. Marvellous letters they seemed to him, and full of a quality that he called 'litry genius'. He chuckled delightedly over Nicky's schoolboyish, exuberant descriptions of Farmer Crabbe, and Mrs Crabbe, and of his fellow-pupil, a taciturn young man named James. He cherished a wonderful plan for paying Nicky a visit once this tiresome business of Harold and Lily should have been settled.

The hostility between Lily Colebrook and Selina Bush became open—a domestic scandal. Egg was reluctantly aware of it. 'Now my boy, you and me must have a bit of a talk.'

Harold stared at his boots. 'All right, Dad.'

'Don't like the look of things, I don't. Sleena's been behaving very queerly about you and Lily. Very queerly indeed she has. What's the meaning of it?'

'Better ask *her*,' mumbled Harold. 'It's a bit thick, if you ask me, the way she goes on about us. Lily says it's time she went about her business.'

'Indeed?' Egg's voice was gently sarcastic. 'That's what your Lily says, is it. And maybe she's her reasons. Yes, my boy, and maybe Sleena's *her* reasons for behaving as she does. I'm not a blind bat, let me tell you. Nor an old fool neither.'

Harold grew red. 'Don't know what you mean, Dad.'

'Well,' said Egg, at once plaintive and exasperated, 'Sleena didn't *use* to behave like that. What's come over her? . . . Now tell me straight, Harold. I want to know. Has there been anything going on between Sleena and you?'

'Course not!' answered Harold limply, with the feeblest show of indignation and surprise. 'Oh what's the good of talking about all that now.'

'No good at all in lies,' said Egg sternly, 'if that's what you mean.' He was profoundly wretched. His voice trembled. 'How long has this been going on?'

But he hardly listened to Harold's answer. It was drowned by the tumult within him. Such treachery, such wickedness, and in his own house! Was it not enough to break an old man's heart to discover such rottenness in his son? Yes indeed it was. The teaching of the Reverend Shadrach Pierce left him in no doubt of that. What had he done to deserve such a son! 'It's a mercy your poor mother didn't live to hear of this!' Harold, hang-

ing his head, made no reply; and Egg's anger spent itself silently against that silence. In a few minutes he had sounded, in quick succession, the whole gamut of appropriate reactions: from primitive excitement, prudish horror, moral indignation and social alarm, to intelligent understanding. And, resolutely turning his back on the shade of Shadrach Pierce, who would have persuaded him that this son of his was doomed to suffer everlasting hellfire, he summed up his final thought on the matter by saying: 'Time you got married, my lad, that's what it comes to!' Crimson to the ears, Harold agreed. 'Anyhow,' he blurted out, 'it wasn't any fault of Sleena's, Dad! Don't go blaming her!' And Egg, in his misery, took comfort from this small sign of grace in the sinner.

A campaign was set afoot for making an honest man of Harold. A formidable task, but not an impossible one. Egg shouldered the responsibility with energy: the more readily, perhaps, because he vaguely foresaw that it hastened the day of his release from Farringay. His first and last difficulty was with Lily Colebrook, who suddenly, finding herself the centre of attention, decided that she wouldn't marry Harold, not on any account she wouldn't.

'And quite right too!' said Egg severely. 'You don't deserve a good girl like Lily. Better look round for somebody else.' But repenting of his severity—for Harold, at twenty-eight, seemed pitifully immature to him—he asked: 'Are you really fond of her, my boy?' It was on the tip of

his tongue to ask another and a more searching question, for he was troubled by the fear that this young man, cheap all through, knew nothing of love's heights. 'Are you really fond of her, or is it . . .' But he left it at that, and even so, seeing Harold's confusion, did not stay for an answer. 'Because if you do, I daresay she'll forgive you.'

'She says she hates me,' said Harold. 'She says why don't I marry Sleena.'

'Marry Sleena!' cried Egg, up in arms. 'What the devil next! Not but what you ought to, in a way,' he hastily added, blushing for his violence. 'But marriage is a long business. It's no good rushing it. And I won't have my son marrying any Sleenas, and that's flat.' To whom did he address this defiance? Not, surely, to Harold, who cannot be suspected of an eagerness to marry Selina. And not to Lily Colebrook, whose innocent piece of rhetoric Egg perfectly understood. Perhaps it was to Farringay: to all the folks who knew him as a commonplace grocer and knew not that his father had been gentle.

And now that he had started this benovelent meddling he found that he must go on with it. It became his fixed idea that Harold must be married —if possible to Lily Colebrook; if not, to some other nice girl. His dream was that the pair of them should take over control of the shop, leaving him free to follow the devices and desires of his own heart. These desires pointed all in one direction—Nicky; and the picture of Nicky was doubly

attractive because it was now framed in Mershire. Egg fancied himself living snugly in a little cottage, with Nicky either sharing it (and going to and from his work as a farm-hand) or, married to some wholesome pretty country wench, living within easy distance. Although his own experience of marriage had been an unhappy one he never doubted nowadays that Nicky's wife would be a treasure, a perpetual delight to her husband, a solace to her father-in-law, and a wise mother to her family of boys and girls. Egg had already, you might say, chosen Nicky's wife for him; such a wife as he, Egg, would perhaps have chosen for himself had he his time over again; a tall, deep-bosomed, generously proportioned girl, with music in her speech and kindness in her heart; a girl not unlike the girl his own mother, Elizabeth, must once have been, and still more like someone he had known a lifetime ago whose face he had forgotten but whose personal quality—some exquisite essence more subtle than the smell of roses—pervaded, like a breath, certain moments that still recurred in his life at intervals, moments of stillness and perplexed wonder, a mystery of which he had long since lost the key. That he might one day live within reach of this son and this son's wife, and take pleasure in the sight of his grandchildren, was now the old man's dearest hope, in pursuit of which he quite forgot to consider the problem of what was to become of Selina: all his plans were based on the unconscious and absurd assumption that Selina would remain where she was. Selina was peculiarly

dependent on these Pandervils; she had never known another home than theirs except the home provided for her in infancy by a philanthropist named Barnardo.

For three days Lily Colebrook maintained a stern silence. Then necessity—aided, perhaps, by irresolution—sent her to buy groceries at Pandervil's Stores. Harold might be a scoundrel, but that was no reason why Lily's poor mother should be deprived of her bacon for breakfast, was it? And though there were other grocers' shops in Farringay she did not recall the fact until too late. Besides, it would serve Harold right to be forced to hand her a pound of rashers, politely, across the counter, and to see her eyes studiously avoiding his. It would show him how utterly indifferent she was. All things considered, we must allow a hundred good reasons for Lily's calling at Pandervil's Stores, and not a single one against that enterprise. Perhaps Egg was shrewd enough to divine how her mind worked, for he hadn't, we must suppose, lived seventy years with his eyes shut; and perhaps he knew that the sight of himself behind the counter—where Harold was so often to be found—was something of a shock to the girl. He could not forbear to glance at her with amused, twinkling eyes, though he veiled their light the moment after with a look of sympathetic consideration. She was, after all, a very young thing; young, and proud, and to Egg's mind pathetic. He half-wished her a better husband than Harold seemed likely to prove, yet he wished Harold to

have her and love her and falsify his dismal forebodings.

'Well, Lily?'

'Good evening, Mr Pandervil. A pound of Mother's rashers, if you please.'

'Certainly, my dear.' There was a touch of gallantry as well as solicitude in his smile. 'Now I was hoping you might pay us a visit.' Lily did her best to look sullen, but succeeded only in looking wistful. 'Because,' went on Egg, after a silence, 'I wanted to have a little talk with you.'

Lily met his glance timidly. 'Did you, Mr Pandervil?'

'I did,' said Egg.

You might have supposed, by his demeanour, that Mr Pandervil had reached the conclusion of the whole matter. He closed his lips tightly and addressed himself to the task of cutting slices of bacon as though there were no more to be said. But when the mounting pile of rashers at last turned the scale he placed his long knife carefully beside them, and remarked, a trifle too cheerfully: 'So you've sent my young scamp about his business, have you Lily?'

'Meaning Harold?' asked Lily superflously, her cheeks a deep scarlet.

'Meaning Harold,' agreed Egg, with but the faintest inflection of irony in his tone. He leaned on his elbows across the counter. 'And you've done right, my dear. He's got what he deserves, and that's nothing. Leastways not a good wife. He doesn't deserve that, not by a long way. A good-

for-nothing idle lout, that's what he is; and he'll come to a bad end, depend upon it. You're well rid of him, Lily Colebrook.'

The girl stared in surprise at this prodigious parent, so ruthless in judgment of his son.

'He's a fair misery about the house nowadays,' resumed Egg, after a meditative silence. 'Moping and moping and not a word to say. As for appetite, the mere sight of food makes him *sick*, by the look of it. And serve him right, I say, for he's a perfect scandalous disgrace. He's brought it all on himself by his own wickedness and he'll get no sympathy from me. If I was a younger man I'd take a stick to him I would.'

Lily studied to conceal whatever of consternation she may have been feeling; but it is certain that she had never before seen the mild Mr Pandervil in such a towering rage. In Farringay he was accounted a genial old fellow, for a new generation had grown up knowing nothing of the story of how Mr Pandervil had hurled his own wife's mother into a cab, or of that other story, better authenticated, of how he had punched the nose of a glossy gentleman who had kindly offered to buy his business from him. Lily knew him only as a highly respected deacon of the Ebenezer Chapel, and as the father of her errant Harold.

'Mind you,' said Mr Pandervil, 'I won't say there's not the *making* of a man in him, if some good girl was to take him in hand. He's got an affectionate nature, and he'd learn, he'd learn. But who,' asked Mr Pandervil indignantly, 'who

would have anything to say to such a young rip! Not you, Lily. It's too great a sacrifice.' Mr Pandervil dismissed the subject with a sigh, and turning to the rashers of bacon, as for comfort, he wrapped them in grease paper and slipped them into a paper-bag on which was printed *Pandervil for Purity Value and Fair Dealing*. He paused, for perhaps the ten thousandth time, to regret that flamboyant inscription, in respect of which, though he privately thought it vulgar, he had allowed himself to be overruled by its author, his brother Algernon. Quite a balloon of a fellow now, having for many years waxed fat in prosperity and geniality, Algy still paid an occasional welcome visit to his younger brother, 'dear old Eggie'. And on the last such occasion but one—three years ago, just before poor Minnie took and died—he had set about bringing Egg's business methods up to date. 'Pandervil for Purity—that goes well, boy! Glad I thought of that. Nice little bit of allitration. Pandervil for Purity—I should just think so indeed! That'll fetch 'em. And Value and Fair Dealing, that means they're getting their money's worth, and a bit over. A bit over, Eggie old son, hey? Here, gimme a spare bag, will you, and I'll get this little affair sketched out. Like this.' He sucked his pencil thoughtfully, staring into distance at his visionary design before committing it to black and white. 'How'd it be to say "the original Farringay grocer" or "the shop your grandmother patronized?" No?' Another pause. The artist is in labour with his creation. Then he rises to his

feet, his eyes sparkle. 'I've got it, Eggie! By George I've got it. Pandervil for Purity, Value, and Fair Dealing. The man that put the gay in Farringay. . . . What d'you say to that, my boy!' Egg tried to conceal his alarm; but he need not have bothered, for Algy was in no mood to observe it. 'I don't somehow think that last bit'll do, Algy. Nothing very gay about grocery after all. Besides people wouldn't quite like the sound of it.' Algy, on the point of looking offended, checked himself and cried with a laugh: 'Ah, boy, trouble with you is you've no imagination. The best fellow in the world, Eggie, but no imagination old man. And no jolly old GO, if you see what I mean. As for nothing gay about grocery, well why not, that's my answer to that. Whose fault is it, Eggie? Not mine, old boy, I assure you. 'Pon my word, no. If I'd *my* way this little shop of yours 'ud be the brightest little spot in Farringay.' Egg, unable to bear his brother's disappointment, broke out into praises of the earlier part of the scripture. 'That's an idea, Algy, that is. But as for the gay part—honestly I'm afraid of it. My deacons, y'know, they'd think it a bit on the fast side.' Algy, warm with friendliness and self-approbation, wagged his head sagaciously. 'Know what you mean, old man. Concubines and such. I know the kind of thing, trust me. . . . Well well, I'm not one to take offence. You know that. We'll leave it at Pandervil for Purity, as you say. Though I don't mind telling you, Eggie, that to my way of thinking that last bit's the best of all. Never mind.

Never mind. I won't say another word about it.' One sees the frustrated man struggling not to say another word about it. His face was sombre for perhaps half a minute. Then, heroically, he remarked with an effort: 'Pandervil for Purity—why, old man, that'll be worth fifty pun a year to you, or I'm a Dutchman.' Egg gasped with relief to be let off so lightly. 'Yes, Algy, a good notion, that was. Glad you thought of it.' Whereupon Algy was quite himself again. 'Oh I get these little ideas, y'know,' he said airily, dismissing the trifle with a nod. 'They just sort of pop into my nut, y'know.'

Egg, counting out Lily Colebrook's change, recalled how very different Algernon's demeanour had been on his subsequent visit. Poor old Algy, he thought, 'twas a terrible blow to him when Min went. And swift on that thought followed another: It'll be my turn soon . . . But resolutely shaking free of his reverie he remembered Lily Colebrook and his errand with her. 'What I intend to do, my dear, is just this. He shall have what he deserves, Harold shall. And since *you* won't have him I'll make him do the right thing by Sleena.'

Lily's mouth fell open in alarm. 'Not marry her, Mr Pandervil! You'll not let him marry her!'

'Let him! Let him!' cried Mr Pandervil, with a laugh that was almost sinister. 'I'll *make* him, that's what I'll do. The lad's made his bed and he must lie on it.' With the words out of his

mouth he became suddenly afflicted by a sense of their possible indelicacy, and had to seek sanctuary in a fit of coughing, after which he reiterated his decision and added serenely: 'And a wretched life he'll have of it, you may be sure, my dear.' Nodding at her grimly he turned away and retired to the back of the shop.

He listened gravely, two days later, to Harold's excited confidences. 'She's changed her mind, Dad.'

'Has she indeed! Now which way is it this time, Harold? She's changed her mind so often, I've lost count.'

'She's . . . forgiven me. She'll have me.' With a flicker of complacency he added: 'I thought I'd manage somehow to bring her round.'

'Ah, you're a clever lad, Harold!' said his father; and seeing the boy wince under his lash he went on quickly: 'Well, we'd better get the bells ringing before she changes her mind again, eh?' He began unfolding some of his plans. 'I suppose you and Lily'd be content to carry on the shop here, wouldn't you?'

Harold met him with a puzzled face. 'What about you? Not feeling ill or anything, are you?'

'Never mind about me, my boy. I'm not going to die if that's what you mean. Leastways not before my time comes. But suppose I wanted a bit of a change, country air and so on, would you and Lily take over the business from me?'

For a few minutes they discussed ways and means. But Harold abruptly ended the discussion

by blurting out: 'And what's to happen about Sleena?'

Misunderstanding him, Egg answered: 'As to that, we'll let bygones be bygones.'

'Yes, but *she* won't,' said Harold, rather impatiently. 'Sleena won't. Nor will Lily, I daresay. Can't have Sleena in the house with us, can we now!'

Egg's face fell. 'I never thought of that.'

'You see what I mean?' said Harold.

Egg nodded. 'This'll need thinking over. Funny thing, it never once came into my head. But it certainly *is* a difficulty.'

The thought of this difficulty induced a kind of fever in him as the days went by. Impatient to put his plans into effect, he could brook no delay. He began to cast sidelong anxious glances at Selina, vexing himself with the thought of her stubborn resolution to make trouble if she could. Sometimes he came near to hating her, but an inconvenient sense of justice intervened to remind him that her malice, though deplorable and wicked and a nuisance, was not a thing to be wondered at. Perhaps even in this salutary reflection, which he encouraged by way of self-admonition, there was a touch of pious make-believe; for indeed he did marvel, always had marvelled, at the spectacle of human malice, which, as he might have told you in a moment of intimate confidence, didn't after all seem to make anybody much happier. He tried to harden his heart against Selina, but the attempt did not avail. Frequently, when she was not looking,

he shot at her a scowling glance that was in effect a malediction; but he didn't seriously entertain the possibility of turning her adrift. His house had sheltered her too long for that, and, now that he came to think about it, he discovered in himself a proprietary affection for her. He liked her—tiresome as she now was, and ugly in her new mood—because she was dependent on him, because in a quiet and more than half unconscious fashion she had been loyal to him, and good to his children, through more than one domestic crisis, and because—well, because, simply, he was used to seeing her about the place. He brooded, sometimes anxiously, sometimes wrathfully; but he could not escape the fact that somehow or other she had got to be taken into account. He couldn't just say: 'Look you here, Sleena, Harold and Lily are getting married, and I'm afraid you'll have to take a month's notice. Of course if you want a reference—well I'll say all I can for you, my girl.' He tried this over, this eminently reasonable and sensible speech, and instantly recognized it as baseness and treachery; for it was his profound conviction—which he had never tried to express in words—that in this world of mortal creatures all unkindness is a sort of treachery, and he sometimes wondered if even God himself could be quite so unkind as his fellow-Ebenezerites believed. Into his perplexed mind there flashed at last the beacon thought of Mabel Finch, his depressed, middle-aged, prolific daughter, the wife of a cadaverous fishmonger considerably her senior, and the mother of (so far)

five children, whose noses not the fondest grandfather in the world could have regarded with unmixed pleasure. Following the gleam of his new idea, he paid a rare visit to Albert Avenue.

Mabel, I don't know why, had become conspicuously ample in her person. She was not, her neighbours fancied, very happy in her marriage; and her temperament did not match her appearance. Her figure was of the build called 'comfortable', the figure that goes with a bright eye and a bustling cheerful manner. But Mabel, if she bustled at all, bustled drearily; her eyes were tired; and though she rarely uttered a word of complaint, having better uses for such energy as was left to her, her voice was always complaining. She had become, by reason of her altered appearance and diminishing appetite for quarrelling, even more of a stranger to her father than she had been during her mother's lifetime. He could hardly, poor man, believe that he and no other had begotten her. The sight of her invariably saddened and humiliated him by quickening his sense of having, as a father, failed her. In her infancy he had been too ready to regard her as merely an appendage to Carrie and another potential cause of disagreement in the house, and that Carrie had consistently forced this attitude upon him was insufficient now to secure him an acquittal from his own tender conscience. He sometimes shamefacedly slipped half a sovereign into Mabe's hand at parting, for he guessed that she was kept short

of money by her tippling husband; and he would have given a substantial sum, ill as he could spare it, had he had any confidence in its power to redeem her house from the squalid odour that filled it—an odour, pungent and nauseating, that floated across the threshold to meet him the moment Mabel, drearily hushing her children as she shuffled up the passage to admit him, opened the door six inches and vigilantly inserted her large nose in the narrow aperture. But Mr Pandervil was notoriously a bit of a crank about fresh air, being one of those eccentric bodies who even in winter, and with no medical journalists to prompt them, slept with their bedroom windows visibly open. He was ashamed of so profoundly disliking the smell of his daughter's house; and, indeed, it was probably no worse than that of the others in her row.

'Why, it's Father! Come in, do.' A faint suggestion of pleasure tinged Mabe's colourless voice. And with a gallant attempt at brightness she added, mournfully: 'Quite a stranger!'

'Well, my dear.' Leaning awkwardly towards each other across the doorstep, father and daughter exchanged their customary peck. Then, with the unmistakable air of being glad the ritual was over, Egg entered the house hat in hand, driving—as it seemed—Mabel before him; for as he moved forward, eyeing the hat pegs desirously, she was forced back, there being not room enough for him to pass her. She was slow, as usual, and he in his nervousness was afflicted with a spasm of

impatience, so that he trod on her toe and nearly stumbled.

'Beg pardon,' said Mabel, like a well-drilled child. 'Did I hurt you, Father?'

'Sorry!' said Egg. 'My fault.'

'Are you sure I dint hurt you, Father?'

'No, no. Not a bit. What about your toe?'

'Oh, granted, I'm sure!' retorted Mabel politely. 'Let me take your 'at, Father.' The hat changed hands and was hung on a peg. It fell down and was hung up again. The third time it seemed likely to remain, but it was nervous work edging past the hall-stand, which shook dangerously if you bumped into it. The best way was to stand with your back pressed firmly against the opposite wall and slide along keeping your stomach contracted until the danger-point was passed. 'This *is* a narrow 'all!' admitted Mabel, with a sigh. ''Ardly worth *calling* an 'all, I always tell Dan. But it's nice for the children, isn't it?'

'Nice for the children?'

'A sort of cricket pitch for 'em,' explained Mabel. 'Dan says it don't do the paint any good. But I say let 'im 'ave the children to look after day in day out and 'e won't be so nice about a bit of paint.'

'Well it's not such a tight squeeze as it used to be anyhow,' ventured Egg, wishing that Mabe would move out of the way and let him sit down somewhere. 'When the pram used to be here,' he explained. As, at last, she backed into the parlour, and the journey's end was in sight, he recalled how

that perambulator had had to be pushed back into the kitchen every time a visitor appeared. A stupid arrangement he had always thought it, and so like poor Mabe.

'No, we've done with prams for a bit, thank 'eaven!' As though surprised by the feeling in her tone Mabel added apologetically: 'Though I dint ought to swear about it like that, did I? Come and sit down, do, Father. You must be tired, I'm sure, and you at your age.'

'Not a bit tired!' declared Egg. He sat down and began mopping his brow. 'Well, how's Daniel and the children, my dear?'

'Oh, mustn't grumble, time of the year,' said Mabel, sinking slowly into a chair. 'How's yourself, Father? I do 'ope,' she added plaintively, 'I do 'ope I dint 'urt you, Father, when I sort of tripped you up just now in the 'all.'

Egg approached his subject by way of Harold. 'Well, we shall be losing Harold soon now, I suppose.'

'Eh?' said Mabe. 'Has he been sickening?'

'Sickening for marriage,' said Egg curtly. 'Him and Lily's made up their minds at last, it seems.'

'A bit 'eadstrong, isn't it?' ventured Mabe. 'I never did 'old with doing things all in a flurry. Not a thing like getting married anyhow.'

'That's right enough.' Egg could not but approve the sentiment, though he was aware that Mabe was being ridiculous. 'Still, two years is long enough for most folks to make up their minds in. And they've had nigh three, to my reckoning.'

'Well, I only 'ope it'll turn out for the best, I'm sure,' said Mabe, in her mortuary manner. 'But is 'Arold *earning* enough to get married on, Father?'

'I'm paying him enough, if that's what you mean.' In spite of his kindly intentions Egg was allowing his daughter's dismal airs to nettle him. 'He's got a head on his shoulders where business is concerned, that boy has. I never thought I'd live to say that of him, but fair's fair, as your poor mother used to say. He's brightened the shop up quite a deal, what with this and that.'

'Ah, you'll be sorry to lose 'im then.' Here, Mabe seemed to imply, here surely is a fit occasion for melancholy.

'Well, when I said lose him,' admitted Egg, confused, 'it was only a manner of speaking. Because of course he'll stay on where he is and keep the shop going for me. I'm not so young as I was, and I'll praps take things a bit quieter.'

'So you ought to, Father. I was saying to Dan only the other day: If anything was to happen to Father, I said——'

'Now see here, my girl!' Egg spoke with unwonted decision. 'Nothing's going to happen to me, so you can put that out of your mind. Nothing's going to happen to me except what happens to everybody sooner or later. If you mean die say die and have done with it—I never set up to be immortal, as I knows of.' First Harold, now Mabe, he thought angrily. Treat me like a child they do, with their silly hints. 'What I was won-

dering,' he went on, looking a little sheepish after his outburst, 'was whether you couldn't do with a bit of help about the house here.'

'No offence meant, I'm sure,' said Mabe, stiffly. 'I'm only too glad to 'ear you're all so prosperous. Only too glad, as any right-feeling person *would* be. Only one does 'ave to think a bit a'ead, and if Lily was to have any family, so to speak——' Mabe broke off self-consciously, and added after a moment's silence: 'Praps I dint ought to be talking like this, but plain speaking's my way, I'm afraid, and always was.'

Egg was on the point of saying that young people seemed to pick and choose a bit nowadays in this matter of parenthood; but one cannot discuss such matters with one's daughter, can one?—even though she *is* past forty and has five children. So he remarked instead: 'What I mean to say is, there'll be Sleena to spare now if you could do with her. She'd be a help to you, wouldn't she?'

Mabe agreed, but without enthusiasm, that Sleena would be a help.

'Of course,' Egg said hastily, reading her mind, 'you wouldn't have to worry about paying her. We could see to that between us, somehow. Now Nicky's premium's paid things'll be getting easier year by year. Y'r Uncle Algy's bin very good. Nicky'll be earning his keep before long, and a bit over.'

'I don't 'ardly know what Dan'll say about it,' said Mabe. 'We don't always see eye to eye, and there's no use pretending we do. And besides . . .'

'Besides what?' Egg was anxious and rather irritable.

Mabe, having stared at what was in her mind for fifteen seconds, appeared to dismiss it with a shrug. 'Oh well, I daresay Sleena can look after 'erself. 'Tisn't as if she wasn't a *good* girl.'

Egg met her eye unflinchingly. 'Jusso!'

'It isn't,' insisted Mabe, 'as if Sleena wasn't a girl of good character, I mean.'

'So do I,' replied Egg shortly. 'She'd be all right that way.' He believed what he said, but the need for equivocation made him almost blush.

'But then,' said Mabe, dolefully, 'I don't suppose she'd care about coming to 'elp me. It's no picnic, she'd better know that.'

'Set your mind easy.' Egg contrived to look at his daughter in an exceedingly knowing fashion.

'You think she'd like it . . .?'

'Well,' admitted Egg, 'she dint say in so many words she wanted to come to you. But I know pretty well what's in her mind.'

Egg's false exuberance got to his head; seeing success so near, he almost winked at Mabe. And when, that same evening, he set about executing the more difficult part of his plot he was armed not only with courage but with this new cunning that nature, as it seemed, had so unexpectedly and belatedly endowed him with.

He hovered about the scullery where Sleena was washing dishes. He knew from experience that this was the best place for conversation with Sleena. Elsewhere she would find endless occasion

for jumping up and putting something or other 'to rights': here, engaged in washing up, she was spiritually tethered to her sink.

'My daughter Mrs Finch,' said Egg, chattily, 'she's not keeping up her strength the way I'd like to see.'

'Reelly, Mr Pandervil? Selina made a sympathetic grimace, and her eyes shone with a compassion that was greedy for nourishing details of the distemper. 'Nothing serious, I 'ope.' Within her limitations Selina was a good-hearted young woman, and she wished Mrs Finch no harm. Yet there's something about a bad illness, isn't there?—it sort of makes a bit of a change and it's something new to talk about. It was self-denying of Selina to hope as she did.

'Yes, I'm very worried about it, Sleena; between ourselves, mind. She's too much to do, that's the fact of the matter. Rushed off her feet with those five children.' He spoke with feeling now as well as with calculation. Time had wrought an unconscious change in his point of view. Five children, in his young manhood, would have seemed to him a very moderate family indeed: now, in 1907, it seemed excessive for such folks as Mabe and Dan. 'It's too much work for one woman,' he concluded, cocking a meaning eye at his audience. 'She was saying to me yesterday what a comfort it'd be to have someone to give a hand—someone she knew and could depend on. It'd be a bit of company too. Now if only, she said, our Sleena could be spared—those were her very words.'

Selina, red with pleasure, could only say: 'Reelly, Mr Pandervil?'

'Yes,' said Egg, in an off-hand way, 'she thinks very highly of you, does my daughter Mrs Finch. I don't know if you know it, but there it is.'

By a triumph of self-control he refrained from mentioning Harold's marriage. But, with these golden eggs laid, he could no longer resist taking private joy in the brood of happiness that time, he believed, must hatch from them. And, deacon though he was, and a constant if inaccurate bass in the Ebenezer Choir, he felt not the least compunction about having practised deception on these two women. Mabe, after all, would be the better for Selina's company and help; Harold and Lily would be the happier for her absence; and Selina herself would have been not unkindly disposed of. He had the happiness of all these folks genuinely at heart; but now he no longer disguised from himself the main motive of his scheming. That motive became more and more apparent as the weeks went by. These obstacles surmounted, he began to count the days to the wedding. So, too, we must suppose, did Harold; and so, we must hope, did Lily. These days of waiting were something of an ordeal for all three. Harold dreamed of Lily, and Lily of Harold; while Egg, with mounting excitement, kept telling himself that soon, if only for a few hours, he would be seeing Nicky again.

3

For her daughter's wedding party Mrs Colebrook—for the first time since her husband's funeral — unlocked the folding doors between parlour and drawing-room, and wound, not very hopefully, the large gilt ormolu clock that had been rich Uncle Eustace's wedding gift to herself half a lifetime ago. A fantastic thing she thought the clock, and she never ceased to reflect that the price of it would have paid for Lily's education. For twenty years, no less, it had stood silent on the drawing-room mantelpiece; but now, responding to her ministrations, it began ticking in a hearty, an almost nasal voice: a voice that to Mrs Colebrook's fancy, as she stood listening with the key of the clock in her hand, somehow suggested that of Uncle Eustace himself. It was a husky resonant throat-clearing note—tick tock, I'm a rich clock—and it conjured up so vivid a picture of red whiskers and bulging eyes and a vast striped waistcoat that Mrs Colebrook could not but believe for a moment that Uncle Eustace was alive again and standing in this very room with her. She had been both fond and afraid of Uncle Eustace: fond because he was good to her and because it was her nature to be fond, yet afraid, sometimes, of the greedy light that shone in his little eyes when he looked as though he wanted to make a meal of her. She had never quite liked his clock; never since his death had she touched it, except with a duster, until now.

It had stopped ticking soon after Uncle Eustace's heart had stopped beating, and now that it had started again she half-believed that he too had a new lease of life. Well Alice! And how's my little niece this morning? I've brought some butterscotch for you, ducky. Mrs Colebrook listened with eager horror to the voice issuing in her mind from the red whiskers; and she cast down her eyes, shuddering, lest she should meet the glance of a ghost; for Uncle Eustace was now so much more alive to her than was the alert young petty officer, her late husband, whose portrait smirked upon her from the drawing-room wall. 'Stuff and rubbidge!' said Mrs Colebrook, employing her favourite oath. She shook herself free of her fancies, and glancing up at George, as she moved to the window to let in some fresh air, she encountered a thought that had never presented itself before: that, whereas she always saw herself as a little younger than her husband, and a generation younger than Uncle Eustace, she was in fact at this moment a quarter of a century older than George had been when he died. Old enough to be his mother, she muttered to herself, and she suddenly felt sick and weary and afraid of life. The clock in the drawing-room ticked with unction; the clock in the parlour ticked with discretion; and time went on, taking account of neither.

Here, in this double room, the wedding party assembled after the ceremony. It was a triumph for Mrs Colebrook that with so large a gathering there were yet seats for all but one. The party

might have been designed as an illustration of the Church's Tables of Consanguinity; for everybody, it seemed, was in some degree or another everybody else's uncle, cousin, or aunt, or so Mrs Colebrook persuaded herself when she learned that Harold's grandfather, Richard Noom, had had an Uncle and Aunty Bunce; for Lily, too, had an Uncle and Aunty Bunce, 'and seeing it's the same name, Mr Pandervil, there must be some relationship somewhere, though it's not as if Bunce was what you'd call an uncommon name, and of course, it's not as if Uncle Bunce was her real uncle, though real enough since he married Dinah Colebrook, my own sister-in-law, who was with me, more's the mercy, when George was taken. And if Harold's grandfather's uncle should turn out to be no other than Lily's Uncle Bunce's grandfather, then Lily's Uncle Bunce would be your very own cousin, Mr. Pandervil; by marriage I mean, since you would have married Uncle Bunce's grandfather's niece's daughter.' This conclusion seemed to afford the greatest possible satisfaction to Mrs Colebrook: she declared that it was an omen; and the guests, pausing in their coterie conversations, listened so attentively that at length the silence embarrassed her and she looked up in confusion, her glance falling finally on the youngest of all the Bunces, a fair-haired pimply young man who hovered uneasily near the piano hoping that nobody would notice there was no seat for him. 'Why Sonny! Can't you find a chair, poor boy!' Mrs Colebrook's distress, and Sonny's gallant avowal that he'd

rather stand, set all the men in the room in a state of perturbation. 'You sit here, young man, and let me have a stand for a bit!' The business of eating and drinking was seriously interrupted by this competition in courtesy. But it was Sonny's cousin Daise Hopper who put an end to the situation, and provoked approving laughter, by jumping up from the piano-stool and planting herself in her father's lap. There followed a further dispute, and by the time Sonny Bunce was prevailed upon to sit down the temperature of the room had risen so high that he was emboldened to say, with an arch grin: 'Needn't go over there, Daise. What's *my* knee done?' The remark was a great success, and fully five minutes was occupied in enjoying it, those who had heard it repeating it for the benefit of those who hadn't, and being corrected, in their turn, by those who thought they had heard it more precisely. Several small arguments sprang up: Sonny Bunce saw himself already the subject of a legend; and finally, when a working agreement had been reached, and the text more or less established, the whole story had to be retailed, very slowly, into the ear of Aunty Bee, his mother, who suffered from deafness and had watched the excitement in a frenzy of impatience to be told what it was all about. After this, the serious business of the day began. Uncle Hopper proposed the health of the bride; Uncle Bunce proposed the health of the bridegroom; Uncle Albert proposed the health of the bride's mother. And then it was time for the Best Man to make a few remarks, but the Best

Man, Nicky, was absent, and his deputy was shy. The speechmaking came to an end.

Egg, who sat conspicuous at Mrs Colebrook's side, smiled mechanically, his mind being occupied by one thought alone. Where's Nicky? He'd never be late without good reason: something must have happened. A series of pictures flashed across the screen of his mind: train wrecked, hideous confusion, stretchers, illness, hospital wards. Without Nicky, even had these fears been quelled, the party was nothing: a mere noise interrupting his thoughts. He had the greatest difficulty in concealing his irritation. These people would go on chattering and laughing. Like a pack of monkeys, he muttered angrily. Looking up in response to a nudge, he encountered the reproachful gaze of Mrs Colebrook, and was abashed. Had she read his thoughts? Or, worse still, had he in his abstraction spoken them aloud? 'Beg pardon, Mrs Colebrook? Did you speak?'

'Why Mr Pandervil!' Mrs Colebrook's manner was become so girlish, her tone so richly conspiratorial, that he suspected her of being a little tipsy: with the excitement of getting Lily off her hands, he thought; certainly not with this drop of claret cup. 'Why Mr Pandervil, we've bin and forgot the messages.'

Egg was at a loss. 'The messages, Mrs Colebrook. I don't quite . . .'

'Letters, telegrams, and I don't know what all!' cried Mrs Colebrook, her voice rising triumphantly, so that all might hear her. 'Yes indeed,' she said,

nodding and smiling at the company, 'there's messages in galore!'

Egg began searching, guiltily, in his pockets. 'Bless my soul, I do believe I've left 'em all be'ind.'

'No,' said Mrs Colebrook, 'you never done that, Mr Pandervil.'

'No, 'ere they are!' Egg sighed with relief, and while with one hand he clutched a bundle of papers, with the other he mopped the perspiration from his brow. 'Well, I must put me specs on for this little job,' he said, hoping against hope that he might be able to work up a vein of jocularity. And to reach his spectacle-case, which was in the breast-pocket of his coat—a frock-coat of a somewhat ancient design, and green about the shoulders when seen in an unfriendly light—he must needs replace his handkerchief and allow, in his confusion, the precious messages to flutter out of his grasp. When they were restored to him, by the eager hands of Daise Hopper who cooed maternally in rendering this service, a belated sense of the occasion jerked him to his feet. They think I'm a poor old duffer, that's what they think. He resolved to put a good face on it. He cleared his throat. 'Well, ladies first, I suppose. That's what they taught me at school. What I mean is we'll first have the messages from the bride's relations. Now here they are: there's two of 'em—or is it three? No it's two. Mrs Crump sends heartiest congratulations and fondest love to my darling niece Lily. That is, Mrs Crump's darling niece Lily. *And,*'

said Egg, gaining time while he fumbled with the next of his documents, 'Lily's Uncle Boy—that's not the Uncle Boy that's here: seems she's got two, Lily has—wishes very much he could a bin here to tell the bridegroom what a lucky man he is. And so do we all I'm sure.' They all applauded this, but there was no pleasing Egg to-day: he liked them none the better for applauding. I'm sick of you and your faces, he said in the secrecy of his mind; but, quickly resuming his public character, he went on in his public voice: 'And now we come to Harold's folk. Harold's Aunty Sarah, eighty last week my boy, don't forget that! — Harold's Aunty Sarah Twigg sends a telegram. Loving wishes from Aunty Sarah and may Heavenly Father send rich blessings and long happiness to you and yours. And a tidy sum it must have cost her. Fancy paying a penny for Heavenly Father when she could have sent God for a ha'p'ny.' Egg noticed with infinite relish that he had made a sensation. 'That comes of marrying a parson,' he said, making bad worse. And a freakish turn of memory set him thinking of his late brother-in-law Ernest Twigg, as he had been when he, Egg, was a boy: a hearty fellow Ernest had been then, a back-slapper, very different from the prim ecclesiastic he became in later years. It was little enough that Egg had seen, since their marriage, of this substantial and respectable pair; for he had made up his mind quite early, and for all we know quite mistakenly, that the Twiggs regarded him as a poor relation, and he had sometimes found satis-

faction in knowing them to be childless: it would have been a humiliation to think of Sarah's children being in a higher social grade than his own. It sometimes, but not often, troubled his conscience that he knew so little of his sisters, three of whom, as he was vaguely aware, were still youngish people compared with himself—Felicia, Martha, and Jane were still in their sixties—but growing older I suppose, he said to himself, like the rest of us. There was a letter in his hand from Felicia, the widow of old Sam Reddick the dairyman at Keyborough, and the present temper of his audience, which had discovered in his remark an occasion for giggles frowns and deprecating smiles, according to their several ages and dispositions, made him think that he would do well to read it with no further delay. 'Now Harold my lad, listen to what y'r Aunty Flisher has to say: My dear brother it is a long time ago since I wrote you a letter always leaving such things to poor Sam and pleased indeed to hear that your Harold has got a good girl and Aunty's very best love and wishes I'm sure tell him for future happiness. You'll be pleased to hear as this leaves me my rheumatism's a good deal better——' Egg folded the letter and turned to the next. 'That's all she says concerning you, Harold. Now what's this,' he said briskly, making a great show of interest in the last of his documents. But even while he was reading it the bitterness of not having Nicky there, and fearful conjectures about Nicky's fate, overwhelmed him. His voice, remaining steady, became toneless and tired. He felt like a

cheated child the elaborate edifice of whose plans has at the last moment crashed to ruin before his expectant eyes. For what was the meaning of this wedding if Nicky was away? Why had he fussed and bothered at his time of life, pumping courage into Harold, cajoling Lily, hoodwinking Mabel, and removing Selina, the obstacle, from the path of true love? If Nicky, the reward, were to be withheld after all, he might have spared his pains and saved his labour. The letter in his hand was a garrulous affair, and hard to decipher moreover, so that it took him five minutes or more to communicate its contents; and towards the end, for which he thirsted, he became aware that the attention of his audience was faltering, being divided between him and some reiterated street noise whose significance he did not appreciate. Whispering broke out in the room, and the stirring of restless feet: a disease that, despite the irritated glances he flashed from time to time over the rims of his spectacles, gradually infected everyone in the room but himself. And no sooner had his voice ceased speaking—drattit, he said, 'tisn't as if I *like* doing this sort a thing!—than several of his listeners ran to the window without apology and began a chorus of exclamation. Harold, himself conspicuous among these culprits, called out: 'I say, Dad! I say, Lily! I say, Mrs Colebrook—I mean Ma! Who do you think's arrived! In a blessed motor-car, Dad. Who do you think it is?'

Egg, stumbling towards the window and heedlessly knocking over one of Mrs Colebrook's best

claret glasses in his course, found no words for reply. His mind held but one thought.

'Just you look here, Mr Pandervil,' cried Lily, seconding her husband's endeavours and seizing her father-in-law by the arm.

Harold took up the tale once more. 'Blest if it isn't Uncle Algy! Let's go and fetch him in,' cried Harold, plunging for the door. Perhaps he felt that he, with his Lily, had been in the centre of the picture long enough: it was good to escape. He was followed by the younger members of the party, with Egg hot-foot at their heels.

They crowded round the car. And such a car! A large rich glittering snorting exuberant and self-satisfied air, with a fellow in livery at the wheel and Uncle Algy magnificent and venerable at his side, his eyes shining, his face rosy and wrinkled, his plump hands clasped round his noble belly as though he were congratulating himself on its possession.

Uncle Algy, genially ignoring the youngsters, addressed himself over their heads to his brother: 'Well, Egg old son, here I am as large as life, and it's good to see y'r dear old dial again, pon my word it is!'

Egg said, his voice quavering: 'Seen anything of Nicky?' He had been quick to notice, in one agonized glance, that the back of the car held nothing human.

'Thought I'd run down in the little bus,' said Uncle Algy. 'Capital little scooter, though we did have a bit of a mishap a hundred miles out of

Mercester. But accidents *will* happen, old boy, even in the best regulated motor-cars. You know that.'

'Where's Nicky?' said Egg, unsmiling.

So sharp was the accent of appeal that it at last reached the understanding even of Uncle Algy, who, with a grin that was half sheepish, half sympathetic, replied: 'I've got him safe and sound for you. Trust *me*, boy!' And a voice from heaven, as it seemed, called out eagerly: 'Here I am, Dad.'

Nicky, shooting up amid the baggage in the back of the car, leaped out, falling lightly on his two hands. He picked himself up with a nervous laugh and strode forward to greet his father. He saw the sunshine breaking, as after a night of storm, over his father's face. Bloody silly joke that, he thought; and I as good as told him so, he pleaded in self-justification. 'Hullo, Dad! Think I was never coming?'

'Yes,' said Egg, and for a moment could say no more; and a trembling came over Nicky as he met the glance, the half-incredulous glance, of those old, grave, glistening eyes. Dad's older than he was, there's no doubt of it.

4

'Not sleepy are you?' said Egg.

At last they were back at home sitting comfortably together round the kitchen grate, in which

Egg, deceitfully pretending to have noticed a nip in the air, had with his own hands laid and lit a small fire.

Nicky smothered a yawn. 'Sleepy? Not a bit!'

'Well you haven't got to get up early to-morrow, that's one good thing.'

'No fear,' said Nicky.

'No five o'clock for you to-morrow, my boy.'

'I should jolly well think not,' said Nicky.

His father observed him shrewdly. 'I believe you *are* sleepy, whatever you may say. Want to go to bed?'

Nicky, lacking heart to answer with an unqualified yes, glanced at the clock defensively. 'Let's go at half past one,' he said. 'That gives us another twenty-five minutes.'

'There'll be time for a cup of tea,' said Egg, and leaning forward in his chair he lifted the kettle on to the red coals. 'Soon be boiling.'

Nicky jumped up. 'I'll go and get the crocks.'

'That's the style,' said Egg. He was excited. 'I expect you know where to find 'em, eh Nicky?'

'I expect,' said Nicky.

Father and son exchanged a grin of satisfaction. Having tea at one o'clock in the morning struck them both as being a good joke.

'So Mr Crabbe thinks you'll make a farmer, does he?' remarked Egg for the twentieth time. Unable to wait for Nicky's return he had followed him as far as the scullery door.

'That's what he said,' admitted Nicky, picking saucers out of the rack.

'I thought he would,' said Egg. 'I rather thought he would. That's good news that is.'

But the commendation in his voice was rather perhaps for Mr Crabbe than for Nicky: it was pleasant to know that they had not been deceived in the man.

A cup of strong tea woke Nicky up, and the intimacy of the hour encouraged unprecedented confidences. Nevertheless he cleared his throat several times, and several times, when the words were almost out of his mouth, substituted others at the last moment. 'Got something to shew you, Dad.'

Noting his shyness, Egg pricked up his ears. Some girl, I suppose, he thought: you're starting early, young man. 'Something to shew, have you?'

'Oh nothing so much,' said Nicky, striving (too late) to be casual. 'It's in my bag. Shall I get it?' He was already out of his chair again, his fingers on the catch of the bag. 'It's only a sort of poem. Oh, and I brought a pipe along.' In a shamefaced fashion he pushed a new briar pipe across the deal table towards his father, and then, trying to look as though the gift were not there, unfolded a weekly journal, found a particular page and a particular column, and thrust it under Egg's nose.

Egg was fondling the new pipe and staring brightly at distance and stammering, precisely as Nicky himself would have done in his place. The interruption came as a relief to him.

'A poem, d'ye say? Ah, my boy, I never did have much of a head for poetry.' But as he took

the paper from his son's hand, and followed a pointing finger, some moment of unremembered yet unforgotten past made brief and poignant music in him. 'Lemme get my other specs.' For his eyes were suddenly dimmed, he didn't know why.

The poem was not a long one, but it took Egg some little while to get the hang of it. After the second reading, however, he gave up worrying about the difficulties, being content to enjoy the sensation of warm sunlit woods, and birds singing, and the sound of running water not far away. Yes, he liked the poem. Some parts of it he liked so much that he repeated them over and over again in his mind before venturing a word of comment. But nothing pleased him so much, nor if the poem had been a hundred times better could it have pleased him so much, as the sight of the author's name clearly printed underneath, printed in a real paper that was bought and sold and read by the great and clever people who understood such things, men among whose names must some day, he could not doubt, be numbered this new name: Nicholas Pandervil.

CHAPTER THE THIRD

THE LOVERS

I

Mr Crabbe had been not easily won to the belief that Nicky would make a good farmer. He had seemed, at first, suspicious of the boy. 'Well, young man, I hope you mean to work. Whatsoever thy 'and findeth to do, eh? You know your Bible, I 'ope?'

'I shall certainly do my best,' said Nicky in confusion. He was eighteen and profoundly sceptical of all the religion that had been offered him.

'Do it with all thy might,' said Mr Crabbe, finishing his quotation with a smack of the lips. 'You come from a godly 'ome, I believe, young Pandervil?' Nicky's reply, though unintelligible, was taken to be affirmative. 'Fambly prayers and all, eh?' said Mr Crabbe. He was a short, thickset man between forty and fifty, with reddish eyes, a clipped red moustache, prominent fox-red nostrils, and bushing red eyebrows; no Mershireman he, as his speech made evident, but a foreigner, as the natives say, from one of the more northern counties. Brisk, and brimming with self-complacency, yet not unwilling to be friendly, he stood

with arms akimbo and head cocked appraisingly, awaiting Nicky's answer.

Nicky all but hung his head. 'Now and again,' he said indistinctly. He was as shy and ashamed as Egg would have been in like circumstances. And he was compelled by his truthful habit to add: 'Not so often. In fact, hardly ever. But we *have* had them.'

'Ah!' Mr Crabbe emitted a brief bark of satisfaction. 'We'll mebbe teach you a thing or two more than farming here, eh Mother!' He rubbed his hands together in unctuous glee, and the next morning made haste to begin his good work. For Family Prayers he assumed an accent of quite astonishing refinement, which did not, however, obliterate the impression that even from God himself he would stand no nonsense. The effort to sound humble hurt Mr Crabbe; and he was further hampered in these public devotions by the erratic behaviour of his two young daughters, Gladys and Lottie, and the failure of their haggard, thin-lipped mother to control them. 'O greecious Gard and Heavenly Fawther,' cried Mr Crabbe, with the air of a man in a hurry giving instructions to a lift-boy, 'we would 'umbly ask and crave thy greecious blessing, O Lard, upon this 'ousehold one and all gathered 'ere together at thy footstool. And especially would we ask thee—stop scraping them feet, Lottie!—would we ask thee, at this junction and at this season and at this time, to drop a blessing or two on young Pandervil, the stranger within our gates. There's no call for you to giggle,

Gladys: I'll teach you giggle—with a slipper, girl! Vouchsafe him to do his duty like a man, and work hard, and keep straight, and be a credit. Givvim strength, Gard. Givvim persevverance . Givvim religion. Givvim a sense of duty. And givvim,' said Mr. Crabbe, briskly completing his order, 'thy 'oly spirit.' And when he had finished the prayer, in order to mark the occasion he read with flashing eyes a passage from the Old Testament, spat vigorously into the fireplace, and filled his mouth with a rasher of bacon wound round and round his fork. So, Father having begun his breakfast, Mother and family and Nicky himself timidly followed his example. This was Nicky's first experience of the Crabbes' bacon and the Crabbes' Family Prayers. He had no second taste of either until six days were past and another Sunday was come.

The household included John James, a young man—five years older than Nicky—who was working for his keep and gathering experience against the day when his father would 'set him up'. James was remarkable chiefly for his taciturnity. Such remarks as he made were all most dismally to the point, the point being farming and stock-breeding. At night, when Nicky entered the shared bedroom, he would wake to say 'You're back then,' and instantly fall asleep again. By day, on social occasions such as a bread-and-cheese lunch shared in the fields, he would utter a few pithy sentences, as though trying over his knowledge like a schoolboy preparing for examination. 'Hurdle tegs on

turnips—best way,' he would say, staring mournfully at the crust in his hand. And, half an hour later: 'Clover first like, then wheat—gets ground ready for wheat, clover does.' This was perhaps James's idea of keeping the conversation lively. The rest was silence. Nicky sometimes made mild fun of him, but the industrious fellow was proof against that. Nothing moved him; much never reached him. When Charlie Bly, the cowman, made obscene jokes about Flo Petula, a blameless and attractive young kitchen-maid at a neighbouring farmstead, James grinned and grunted and uttered an aphorism or two about crops and the weather and the price of pigs. Nor did the changing seasons change his demeanour. In summer he sweated, sowing turnips, loading hay-wains, cleaning hedges, swilling out stables and cowsheds, and knocking the small blind heads of unwanted puppies against the stable wall; and in winter, rising in pitch-dark mornings and lighting a candle and shaking Nicky from sleep, he would growl in a sibilant undertone as he wiped his face with a damp flannel, that growl, suggestive of a man trying to smother himself, being his tribute to the winter coldness. But otherwise it made—so far as Nicky could observe—no difference to him whether the sky was blue or grey, the birds singing or silent. By day or by night, in summer or winter, whether drunk or sober, James remained the same neutral-coloured creature, a born drudge, a mechanical farmer, a clockwork man. One day, in the harvest field, he was persuaded to take too much cider,

which indulgence, though it made him more talkative, did not in the least affect the quality of his talk: his maxims that morning covered the whole farming year from seed-time to harvest.

With no one but James within reach, Nicky was starved of companionship. It puzzled him to observe that Gladys and Lottie were rather fond of that silent man, and that he himself, so much nearer them in age, somehow intimidated them. Gladys was sixteen, her sister a year younger; and, though they were not specially attractive or amiable girls, Nicky in his loneliness would have been glad enough of their friendship. He had no one at all to talk to, or even to sit with in the pleasant silence that familiar friendship breeds. Mr Crabbe, uneasily arrogant in his self-importance, was always concerned to prove that he, educated or not educated, was more than a match for any young man who came to him, fresh from school, talking genteel, and with money in his hand, to be taught farming. 'Needn't be afraid of dirtying y'r fingers, Pandervil. Nor y'r boots neither.' This was a favourite saying. And once, when for the first time in history the word 'Woolsack' appeared in the *Mercester Chronicle*, and provoked artless questions from Lottie, Mr Crabbe, having sneeringly extorted an answer from Nicky, burst into angry sarcasm. 'Ah, my love, Mr Pandervil knows, you see. It's what the Lord Chancellor sits on. A kind of cushion. Correct me if I'm wrong, Mr Pandervil. In Germany it's the Rucksack. Ain't that so, Mr Pandervil?' He gave a

short laugh. 'I may not 'ave bin to the Oxford and Cambridge College, but I know what's what. . . . Well Mother, and what are *you* scowling at, eh? You mind y'r own business and look a bit pleasant about it.' Clearly Mr Crabbe was not a man from whom Nicky could hope for friendship. As for Mrs Crabbe, she was too profoundly worried and dispirited to be able to take more than a merely civil perfunctory interest in a young man whom her husband had made up his mind to dislike. Nicky was driven into himself, a dark tumultuous wonderful world.

That world, upon its surface, seemed placid enough, even dull. But below there was a quickening and a restless desire. Earth's loveliness—and Mershire was lovely in Nicky's eyes, though he didn't see it quite as Egg saw it—could not be all. What one saw could never be all. These fields, these birds and beasts, these patient dreaming cows, these young sheep calling to each other like babies, this astonishing sky and those nude maternal hills of the horizon—lovely, he thought, lovely and wonderful, but there's something behind it all, some meaning, isn't there?—something that's like Edna Howard (that boyish fancy), warm and intimate and all-sufficing. In search of this mystery he cycled on Sunday evenings to Mercester, under cover of going to church; and sometimes, indeed, he did go to church, not in order to worship Mr Crabbe's God—an irascible potentate, peevish with age, but still doing a brisk trade in repentance and forgiveness—but in the hope of finding there

what he had never found in the Ebenezer Chapel at home, a presence (for he had read a little Wordsworth) that disturbs us . . . yes, disturbed him, and quickened him, and spilled silence like a benediction into his heart, a presence that he felt in the first soft breath of a summer evening and heard in the soaring skylark. The reaction from Ebenezerism drove him, inevitably, towards the Church of England; but God, if he attended that place of worship, always slipped quietly out, it seemed, just before the sermon. Nicky took some pleasure in the sonorous prayers, though they did not, to his mind, make good sense. And why is religion so *holy*, he thought; and he hardly knew at first what he meant by the question, for he had found no words for his obscure feeling that somehow this holiness, this solemnity and hush, was a kind of timidity in disguise. It could not burst into song, as the lark did; it did not make the heart leap as did the sight of the first green of the year budding in the hedges. It was—and this he did say—sober and respectful and middle-aged, this holiness. And, quite definitely, it wasn't what he wanted. What, then, did he want?

Well at least he didn't want Gladys Crabbe, though perhaps . . . no, he didn't want Gladys Crabbe, who came seeking him one evening, one warm dusky summer evening, in the granary. 'There's a bit of supper ready. Dad and Mum's abed.'

'All right,' said Nicky. He concealed his surprise. 'Thanks. I've about finished here anyhow.'

After a pause he added, making conversation: 'Where's Lottie?'

'She's abed too. She's not feeling herself.'

Gladys made no movement to go. She stood near him, tall and slim and rather disturbing in this new mood of friendliness, her face and flowing hair a vague blur in the dim half-light. 'I say, I'm sorry I was rude to you at tea.'

'What's that?' said Nicky rather sharply. He was surprised to the point of alarm. Gladys was eighteen now, and he twenty-one; and after all, if rudeness was in question, she had been more or less rude to him for two years. But his feeble pretence of not having heard could not be sustained. 'Oh, that doesn't matter,' he said. 'Not a bit.'

The straw rustled. She came nearer. 'Will you forgive me? I've always been catty, haven't I? I dunno why. It's something comes over me, so's I want to bite. It isn't as if . . .' She stretched out an eager wavering hand to him. 'Will you . . .'

'Why, what's come over you, Gladys!' He forced a laugh, which even to himself didn't sound very real. 'You mustn't take things so seriously.'

They confronted each other in the darkness, shadow to shadow. He found it queer and frightening that he could not see her face. And presently the silence was broken by a quick gasping sob. 'Oh I hate you, I hate you!' Her voice broke, changing to a childish squeak. She clutched at his hand and pressed her mouth against it, and sank to the ground at his feet.

'What on earth . . . ? I say, are you ill? Let me help you into the house.'

He felt helpless and foolish, and angry for being made to feel so. Bending over the sobbing girl, he tentatively touched her shoulder, and then, becoming bolder, began lifting her. At last she uncovered her face and thrust him fiercely away. 'I hate you!' she repeated brokenly.

It was very odd; there was something here that greatly puzzled and excited him; he could find no clear reason for not believing what she said, though in his heart he doubted it. He stood waiting until her agitation had subsided. 'Let's go and have that supper, Gladys, for heaven's sake.' At last she consented, and they went back to the house, she walking quickly, with downcast head, a yard or two in front of him. James, as they entered the kitchen, was wiping drops of milk from his ragged moustache. 'Good night,' said James, rising and going to the door, and the two others sat uneasily facing each other, almost as if they were waiting for his heavy footsteps on the stairs to cease and leave them undisturbed. The girl's hair, in colour a lustreless gold with rich hints of copper here and there, was in disorder: a warm handful of it, unfastened, hung over her left shoulder and provided a new setting for her profile. She sat moodily silent, not touching her food; and Nicky, stealing an occasional secret glance at her, saw for the first time that she was a woman. His heart began beating loudly, and he found he could no longer swallow without difficulty. She would have

let me kiss her up there! Why didn't I? Why didn't I want to? For he had never—and he burned when he thought of it—he had never kissed anyone as he now wished to kiss Gladys. But it wasn't Gladys he wanted, as he knew. And he knew, or fancied, that if he let go of himself now he would be committed to something far beyond his calculation, something which, while making him profoundly different (oh profoundly! he thought in his innocence), would leave him in one thing unchanged, for it would not and could not, Gladys could not, appease the ultimate desire of his heart, which was set upon a vision of beauty so marvellous, so remote, so far beyond the range of waking sight, that his imagination was all but exhausted with the labour of conceiving it. I wish she would be quiet, he thought in a panic; for, though she had said not a word since entering the house, and though she kept her eyes averted and her mouth angrily pouting, she was still in a state of tumult.

'Well, bed for me!' said Nicky. His chair scraped on the brick floor.

He walked round the table and past her. Unwillingly, his feet faltered. Gladys did not raise her drooping head, but he saw a shiver pass through her and he hated himself. In imagination he cupped her face in his hands and kissed it hungrily. She would lean back in his arms and abandon herself to him. But it wasn't Gladys he wanted, and he dragged himself away from her allurement. Not Gladys, and yet, as he entered the bedroom—

'You're back then!' grunted James, in his sleep—why the devil didn't I do it up in the granary! It's too late now. I wish . . . if only . . . I wish. Wishing vaguely that everything, especially himself, were different, he at last drifted into sleep, to be wakened, almost immediately as it seemed, by James shaking him.

'Time gup!' James said. Receiving no answer, he repeated the injunction. 'Time gup!'

'What!' Nicky was incredulous. 'Oh *damn!*' James, in his methodical unenthusiastic fashion, was already smearing himself with water. The sight of that unresponsiveness roused a little demon in Nicky. 'James, I made a remark.'

'Eh?' said James.

'I said: Oh damn! Do you agree with me, dear James? Oh damn! Oh blast! It's rotten getting up in the dark. Don't you think so, brother slave?'

'Um,' said James, splashing and hissing in his basin.

Nicky sat up, slid his legs out of bed, and paused for a moment dangling them.

'James, you're a jovial man, aren't you!' He affected a ghastly jocularity for the concealment of his bitterness. 'You're like a suet pudding, James, and when I think on thee, dear friend . . . I say, could you bear to show a bit of feeling sometimes, just to oblige me? . . . Could you? Will you?'

'Eh?' said James. His face emerged from behind a towel. He had not been listening. 'We'll

maybe get a bit of that vetch cleared away 'smorning. No use to anyone, isn't vetch.'

2

Crabbe's Farm, on account of its proximity to the little shop in which Miss Lady Dark sold boiled sweets out of one bottle and picture-postcards out of another, was held to be in the district of Brinkley. Miss Lady Dark (why she had been christened Lady I don't know) was situated almost precisely nine and a half miles east of Mercester, the hub of the civilized world. She sat behind her counter, a large ageing woman with the beginnings of a beard that the young men of an earlier generation would have envied her, and supplied the world with postage stamps, gum, cigarettes, chocolate, stationery, and acid drops in various colours. She did not speak often; she seldom moved; she merely sat still and grew larger and older, and, with the help of her brother the postman, dealt with the letters despatched and received by the five and thirty inhabitants of Brinkley. From Lady's plump fingers Nicky received most of his letters, for they reached Brinkley after the first delivery, and there was no second delivery in the district unless the postman happened to be passing that way. It became therefore necessary, for impatient people like Nicky, to call at the office and confront the postmistress in person. Nicky, in his solitude, became more and more dependent on his letters. Most of them were from his father, who

wrote with unfailing regularity once a week. Others were from Tooley: queer things these, curiously middle-aged and, in spite of their friendliness, somehow formal in tone. Tooley bought and sold in the city; he did not see what he bought; nor, till he had sold it again, did he pay for it; in fact, what he did, so far as Nicky could see, was to sit in his office and do neat little sums the answers to which represented his profit. In this simple fashion Tooley, still in his early twenties, was growing rich; he was thinking, he said, of settling down, and had found (but here I do not believe him) a nice place at Crouch End. No doubt there was a girl somewhere in his mind's eye, but of her he said nothing, so that Nicky was not obliged as yet to burden his imagination with the singular idea of Tooley as a married man, being called 'my dear', and sleeping in a double bed, and mowing a small suburban lawn every fine Saturday afternoon in the summer. But he was a little chilled by the change that had overtaken Tooley. 'Well, my dear Pandy, I must close now, With kind regards and wishing you "all the best", Yours sincerely . . .' In such sentences Nicky could not recognize the voice of his friend. Those quotation marks daunted him.

Not least among the more infrequent of his correspondents was Uncle Algy, who wrote from time to time insisting that Nicky should visit him again. From Uncle Algy he had indeed a standing invitation; such phrases as 'open house' and 'Liberty Hall' were for ever on the old man's lips

and in his letters, and Nicky could not go often enough to please him. Uncle Algy lived at Woodithorpe, a couple of miles north of Mercester where, first as a clerk and afterwards as a partner in the firm of Fox Fox Fox Deever and Pandervil, he had had such a prosperous career. Retiring from business thirteen years before, at the age of sixty-five, he had bought a miraculous 'little place' at Woodithorpe known as the Old Vicarage, where 'me and little Min, Eggie boy, can get a bit of quiet at last'. Quiet was the last thing you would have supposed Uncle Algy wanted, for he was not himself a quiet man, and when presently he got it in a form he had never bargained for—the devastating silence of bereavement—he was changed from that hour, for though he recovered, in time, his jauntiness of manner, there was now something in his life he couldn't talk about. Of Auntv Min he spoke more than enough: of her goodness, her patience, her devotion, and how she was carried off, as you might say, by an east wind on top of a bit of a sniffing cold. But of his grief, and what the loss of her meant to him, he said nothing; the most profound experience of his life, it was the only one he made no conversational use of. Since then he had had Mrs Meadows, a middle-aged widow, to look after him, her father the septuagenarian George Hake to control the garden, and her son Tom to assist both. There were still cronies who came from Mercester and tempted him to eat and drink more than was good for him, for feasting his friends was become perhaps the greatest of

accessible gratifications; and there were one or two young fellows, too, who came to admire and to laugh and to exchange winks with each other behind his back. But for the most part he had no audience but Mrs Meadows, an unresponsive woman, and old George Hake, whom, although he was seven years George's senior and George a man who might have passed for fifty, he insisted on regarding as a venerable museum piece. Nevertheless he was proud of his own age and would have quickly corrected anyone who understated it. He spent most of his time, in fine weather, being pushed about the grounds in a bath-chair by Tom Meadows or driven in his car by the same Tom Meadows (but how different in shining livery!); and he was as full of pawky jokes about his rheumatism as he had once been of boasts about his health. Now, as then, he used hackneyed sayings with the air of having invented them. 'Fit as a fiddle, boy. Fit as a brace of fiddles. But touch wood, of course!' That had been a favourite remark in early manhood. And now, despite his having touched wood regularly for fifty years, he was in the grip of an enemy that he knew would never let him go. 'A bag of old bones, that's me,' he would say, with a pleased air, as though it had been the best joke in the world. 'And a bag of old *aching* bones, what's more. But bless my soul, young Nick, I wish every man o' my age was the match for *me* in health and strength. In a general way y'know. In a general way.' Sometimes, when the sun shone, he would call

his nephew 'Old Nick', and laugh homerically at the joke, recalling what Nicky's Granny Noom had said when Egg, who never wearied of telling the story, had brought to her the news of Nicky's birth and name. It was one of the most enduring and popular of the family jokes; even 'poor Carrie' had been known to enjoy it, and Egg, when he remembered that, for a moment wished her alive again. To Egg, nowadays, she was always, when he spoke of her, 'poor Carrie' or 'your poor mother', that 'poor' representing a forlorn attempt to compensate her, in retrospect, for the fact that even though in a fashion one loved or had loved her, she was for the greater part of her life an essentially unlikeable woman. No one spoke of Algy's late wife as 'poor Min'; one could not pity so blithe a spirit, one could only pity the world that had lost her.

Uncle Algy's house was a solid, dignified, early Georgian building in white stone. Screened, but not wholly hidden, by a group of tall pines, it stood a hundred yards back from a quiet hedge-bordered road. At the back lay three acres or so of garden and a small paddock where the ancient donkey—friend of Nicky's childhood—still grazed. The garden ascended in a series of three terraced lawns to a tiny forest of silver birches. These trees, slender and maidenly, stood, it seemed, on the very edge of the world, with nothing but sky—or was it sea? the imagination asked—shewing between them; for they grew upon a narrow ridge, beyond which the ground sloped sharply away to the wall

that surrounded the estate. Uncle Algy would never allow himself to be wheeled to a point from which that wall was visible; for some reason never stated even in his thoughts, he preferred to stare at the picture of sky that the trees framed for him.

For Nicky the place was at once familiar and new. The reality confronting him strangely confirmed and corrected his childhood memories of it. The garden was so much smaller than he had thought it; and the paddock, once a vast green kingdom of happiness, was now just a paddock, a half-acre paddock. There was a magic gone, and Aunty Min for ever absent; but there was another magic come, for beauty now had for Nicky the air of a promise. The dew that sparkled on that smooth grass, the satin touch of green buds and green leaves, the thrust of flowers towards the light and the young trees yielding to the wind—these and a thousand other incidents in the lovely natural drama were somehow, he dimly felt (not thought), prophetic of a desire fulfilled. And, though he recognized a pathos in Uncle Algy's predicament, he was too youthfully and egoistically alive to be much saddened by it. The old man had had a long life, and couldn't, in the nature of things, last much longer, reflected Nicky; but whenever the spectre started up in his thoughts he was quick to remind himself that death was the common lot and that he, anyhow, needn't begin thinking about it for another fifty years or so. Meanwhile there was life; the board was spread for him, the feasting

hardly begun; and he did not lack appetite. These visits to the Old Vicarage, this contact with an aged man, whetted his appetite, while renewing for him that sense he had had in boyhood of worlds, many in one, of which he alone had the entry. It was Nicky who called this place miraculous, by which he meant only that its conjunction with Uncle Algy was the most improbable thing—now that one came to think of it—that could have happened. Didn't know the old boy had such good taste. But p'raps it was Aunty Min's doing. There was reason for this latter supposition, for it was admittedly due to Aunty Min that the Old Vicarage did not suffer a drastic change of name. 'Algermin House' had been her husband's first fancy, and 'Pandervil Court' the likeliest alternative. 'But y'r aunt didn't see eye to eye about that, Nicky. So I let her have her way. The best woman in the world. The very best, there's not a doubt. But just a lil bit conservative, my boy, as women *will* be. You'll find that out for yourself, young man. Believe *me!* But don't,' added Uncle Algy, 'don't be in too much of a hurry about that kind of thing. Ten years time'll be soon enough, eh?'

'In ten years time I shall be thirty-two, uncle.'

'Dessay you will, boy. Quite an old man.' This was said almost in Egg's manner. 'Don't you be in a hurry.'

'No hurry,' said Nicky, insincerely. 'Still, if I ever do get farming on my own I'll have to instal a butter-maker on the premises, I s'pose. Farmers have to have wives, don't they?'

Nicky took refuge in jocularity, being shy of the subject of marriage because of his consuming interest in it, and shy of discussing his own future because he could not help knowing that Uncle Algy was planning benefactions for him on a large scale. He wished Uncle Algy had been the kind of man one could consult about intimate affairs; he wished, indeed, that such a kind of man existed. But probably Algy, like Egg, would only look solemn and uncomfortable and change the subject, and so make him feel ashamed of having mentioned it. For nowadays Nicky was uneasy; troubled by amorous fantasy, angry with himself, and more than a little frightened, seeing no way of escape but to propose marriage to Gladys Crabbe, whose presence in the house disturbed him more and more as the weeks went by. He confessed to himself that he wanted Gladys, but he knew that it was not Gladys he wanted. The thought of marriage with her made his pulse hurry, and he could hardly stop to remember that there was more in marriage than going to bed with a woman. Sometimes, nevertheless, he did remember this, and found it so little to his liking that he contrived to forget it again. He was divided against himself, the one half of him, nature's dupe, plotting the overthrow of the other, which saw that he was in danger of bartering his life's freedom for a brief fiery pleasure. Dash it, he thought, there's no harm in kissing the girl; and his fancy began inventing a friendship between himself and Gladys—just a warm friendship, nothing more, of which kissing and mutual fondling

should be the innocent expression. It should all be secret and beautiful and chaste. But even while indulging it he didn't much believe in his dream; and under the scrutiny of commonsense it became manifestly absurd and impracticable, for the sufficient reason that in Nicky's world a kiss was in effect a betrothal. In face of that convention how could he explain to Gladys that he had no 'intentions'? The difficulty was insuperable. Meanwhile he found himself on more than one of his Sunday evenings in Mercester, prowling the streets in quest of a temptation strong enough to resolve, however crudely, his torturing doubts. He received and returned glances; he looked back, he wavered in his walk, he turned to follow, and then, defeated by prudence, turned again and resumed his original course. There was one woman in particular whom he often caught sight of; he was attracted by her accessibility, by something in her bearing that he interpreted as comradeliness, and by the feeling that here was a woman without shame, and one, therefore, with whom he himself need have no shame. Sin was not sin to her—a strange and liberating thought! He was attracted, and he wilfully exaggerated the attraction, dressing it up in all the colours of romance. Half-knowing himself to be playing a game of self-deception, he in his thoughts vowed her pretty and plucky and charming; waxed indignant with the world that had degraded her; and longed to rescue her, longed to play knight-errant to her forlornness, a part that would naturally involve an exchange of tenderness. Disgust-

ing muck, he said to himself; she's got something to sell and I want to buy it, that's all. And that wasn't the whole truth either, but it served its purpose, which was to rouse him from a fevered dream and send him hurrying off to the inn-stables where his bicycle was lodged. Cycling back in the moonlight to Mr Crabbe's, he congratulated himself upon having escaped something that he knew would have been ugly in retrospect, a perpetual scourging of his self-esteem; but the thought could not be dismissed that life was after all none the easier for this escape, the danger being avoided but not removed. And this thought was confirmed the very next Sunday evening he had free, for this time he followed her with more persistence: still undecided, it is true, but giving freer rein to his idealizing fancy. In a side street she dawdled and from time to time cast a quick questioning glance at him over her shoulder. Wonderfully alluring she was; his heart throbbed noisily, he could scarcely breathe in his excitement as he sauntered after her, still trying to conceal his interest in her and still uncertain of what he intended. Should he speak? Yes. And what then? Nothing. He intended nothing, after all: with a pang of disappointment he realized that he intended nothing, whatever he desired. This is ugly, stupid; I'll clear out of here, he thought; but his feet still followed—and more quickly now—in the wake of adventure, until the woman suddenly turned round and came towards him. Now at last he'd got to do something, one way or the other. She

stared at him. He met her stare.

'Hullo, dear!' A thin hard voice. 'Where are you off to?'

'Me? Oh, I'm going home,' said Nicky.

'Aren't you coming with me?' She gave him a penny-in-the-slot smile. 'I know a place quite near.'

'Sorry,' he said, 'I've no time.' O Lord what a fool I am! What a mess! He was red with humiliation, thinking how he had wasted this poor drab's time and that she hated him for it. He pulled out some loose silver. 'Would you . . . will you . . .?'

She made no difficulty about that. 'I don't mind if I do, Clarence. Some other time, eh?'

'Yes, another time.' He was so grateful to her for accepting his money that he feigned a more than polite enthusiasm. 'Whereabouts do you . . . live? I mean, where are you likely to be?' Almost before she had finished her answer, to which he didn't at all listen, he was moving away, eager to put time and space between himself and this encounter, that he might forget it, or explain it away, and so stop disliking and despising himself: in which endeavour he very soon succeeded, knowing once and for all not what he wanted but at least what he didn't want.

On his Sunday evenings he went no more to Mercester but to Upridge, whose little parish church provided a convenient pretext for a two-mile walk across fields. Here, in the following spring, he met Jane. His first sight of her was in the church itself, she sitting but a few yards away,

her profile clearly defined against a pillar; and in that moment it was as if the church, and the world containing it, became empty of all but this girl. Silence came upon him, shutting out alien sounds, so that in time, with much listening, he could hear his heart cry out She is mine, mine—his, not to have, for he was uplifted beyond greed of possession, but to worship and to remember. Until it was time to go he remained in an ecstasy, renewing his wonder in frequent glances, slowly gathering with his mind a knowledge of what had happened in him. In the porch, on his way out, he overtook this girl and heard her companion call her by name. She was tall and very dark; young too, perhaps nineteen, perhaps twenty; her eyes were grave and candid; the curve of her cheek was music to him. She and the woman (her mother?) turned off towards Upridge village, and Nicky went on his way possessed by her. The fields he crossed to reach Crabbe's Farm were warmly tinged with sunset; the blackthorn was in bud, and primroses sprinkled their light along the hedges. After walking a mile or so in a heaven-filled silence, Nicky suddenly began singing hymns at the top of his voice, and didn't stop singing, except to take breath, until he came within earshot of the farm. He wondered how he would keep from grinning at folks when he met them; but he managed to avoid the Crabbes; and James, as usual, was in bed before him.

'So you're back then?' said James.

'Not me,' said Nicky. 'I'm a blessed ghost.' The remark passed for facetious, as he had intended it

should, but bits of remembered verse, with other lovely things, had been running in his intoxicated head, and this phrase of all, at the moment, seemed to describe his condition best. He felt free of the body, radiant and free. Darkness had been cast out of him. 'In bed early to-night, aren't you?'

James grunted, deprecating such elaborate conversation. 'Gennelman left a letter for you.'

'Letter? What sort of a chap was he? Where's the letter?'

'Come from y'r uncle at Woodithorpe. And the motor car's fetching you in the morning.'

'The what!' said Nicky. A purely rhetorical question. He was astonished.

'Motor-car. Not deaf, are you! Y'r uncle's sending his motor-car to fetch you.'

'Golly! What's Brother Crabbe got to say about it?'

'He don't mind. It's me does the work, not him. The gennelman soon talked him round.'

'Talking of that gentleman,' said Nicky, 'who is he? How did he get here?'

'In a motor-car. I told you.'

'In a car? It must have been Tom Meadows.'

'As big as a greenus,' grumbled James, 'that motor-car was.' He shut his eyes and gave an aggressive imitation of a man asleep.

Nicky, disregarding this hint, began dancing round the room singing his father's favourite anthem: 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of them that bring good tidings.' Breaking off suddenly he tiptoed to James's bedside and

asked, looking down on the sleeper. '*Are* your feet beautiful, James? I doubt it.'

Grunt, grunt. 'What's that?'

'I was asking about that letter, James. Have you got it?'

' 'Sin one of my pockets.' He pointed with his nose towards the bedrail. 'You can go through 'em all till you come to it.'

'May I really! Consider, James! Don't be rash!' He was already at work on the first pocket. 'Who am I to come prying into your secret life? What if I find a row of little Jameses leaning against a photographer's stile! And their mothers, your lusty paramours! . . . Good, I've got it.'

'Got what?' asked James, staring owlishly. 'You're soaked, fair soaked. That's what you are, Pandervil. They sell beer at your church, by the look of things.'

Nicky was reading his letter:

My dear young Nephew: I have had a bit of a bad turn, but musent grumble time of the year and none the worse for it. I am sending the Car over in the morning to have a bit of an Outing, it will do you good and I have got a bit of news which will meet with your Aprooval, unless I'm a blessed Dutchman which I have never heard of in our family. But joking apart do not fail me, from

Yr. Affec. Uncle,

ALGERNON PANDERVIL.

P.S. Away all day tell Mr. Crab.

The prospect of a day's holiday surprised and delighted him, but it surprised him less now than it would have done a little earlier; for in this new life, in which he had been born not quite two hours ago, happy surprises of this kind and of all kinds were only to be expected. He fell asleep thinking not of his outing with Uncle Algy but of Jane's profile. And chancing to wake in the night he was visited by the idea, which seemed to him quite novel, that he and she must have been always in some mysterious fashion bound to each other, or at the least that he had had prevision of her in dreams: only so could he explain to himself his instant recognition of her.

3

Very warmly wrapped up, for there was a nip in the air this morning, Uncle Algy slowly and painfully walked the few yards from his breakfast-room to his car, being supported on one side by Nicky and on the other by Tom Meadows splendid in green livery. He had just provided his nephew with a second breakfast, for he still retained a hazy memory of his own farming days: 'Early birds you farming fellows, eh boy! And the early worm ain't very filling.' Bubbling with excitement, he had talked incessantly throughout the meal, himself eating very little. 'A little surprise for you, young Nick. Just a bit of a joke up me sleeve. Wasn't going to tell you a thing about

it till arterwards. Going to make it a case of the fay accomply, I was. That's right: eat a good meal boy: you'll need it. There's to be fun to-day, or my name's not Jack Robinson. Altered me mind only yesterday. Dashed if I don't take the boy with me, I thought to myself. Hi Tom, I said, run over to Mr Crabbe's place with this bit of a letter, there's a good chap. And by the way, Nicky' —his voice became wheezily confidential—'don't bother y'r head about anything Tom Meadows may tell you. Full of doctor he is; doctor this and doctor the other. If you're a good boy I'll let you into a secret. My medical man Brother Physic—that's what I call 'im, takes it all in good part, pleasant young chap he is—well, he don't much want me to go out to-day, doesn't Brother Physic. Take things easy, don't tire yourself, not as young as you were, won't be answerable for the consequences—that kind of talk. And me been looking forward to this bit of a how-d'ye-do for weeks past. Not go out!—that's a fine story. Ah, here comes friend Tom. Car ready, Thomas?'

Seated in the car, after the agony—which he angrily tried to conceal—of the struggle to reach it, Uncle Algy consented to be silent for a while; but before long he was at it again. He drew from his pocket a bundle of papers.

'Now where d'ye think we're going first, boy?'

Nicky, smiling, said he had no idea.

'Ever heard of Keyborough?' cried Uncle Algy, infinitely pleased with his strategy.

'Keyborough.' Nicky acted surprise. 'You mean

Dad's old place. I remember you pointing it out to me last summer.'

'I did,' said Uncle Algy. 'You're quite right, my boy. We were in this very car, and here we are again, going to that very farm.'

'To have another look at it?'

Uncle Algy shook with delighted laughter. 'That's good that is. You don't know how good that is, Nicky, not hardly. Yes, we're going to have another look at it. That's just what we're going to do.' He was rosy with joy.

'What's the game, uncle? You've got one of your schemes on, I can see that.'

'Schemes?' Uncle Algy contrived a grimace that was all innocence. 'Me got schemes! Never. Nothing schemy about me, nephew. Everything above board, that's my motto. We're just going to have another look at the old farm that me and y'r dad was boys together on. That's all. And we've got a nice day for it, eh?' He winked with a great show of cunning, and abandoned himself to another fit of laughing, which, however, came to an end with significant abruptness. He glanced guiltily at Nicky.

'Was it a bad one?' asked Nicky.

'The dear old rheumatics,' said Uncle Algy. 'Faithful friends they are, never leave me alone for long.' He grinned defiance. 'Dunno what I'd do without 'em. But listen to this, boy: For sale freehold with vacant possession all that desirable property known as the Ridge Farm, Saffron Ridge, near Keyborough, in the county of Mershire, com-

prising about one hundred acres of grass and plough, together with the large and commodious residence thereto pertaining with all barns, sheds, outhouses and other buildings . . .'

'Oho!' said Nicky gaily. 'They're selling it, are they?' He looked over his uncle's shoulder. 'And by auction too!'

'You're right, boy. By auction it is. And not for the first time. Man and boy I've seen that place change owners four mortal times. Here, you read what they say.' He sat back and rested for half a minute, while Nicky read through the notice of sale. Uncle Algy watched him excitedly. 'See here, boy. You'll come in for a tidy lil bit of cash from me some day, you and y'r dad.' Nicky scowled at the floor. 'Shut the window up, will you . . . *That's* better. Not enough to make you lazy: trust me. But a useful lil sum. *But*,' said Uncle Algy, 'I'm not in any hurry to get to heaven, thank you. No irreverence meant. And I've a fancy for seeing you folks a bit settled and comfortable *now*, if you follow my meaning. That's why we're going to look over the old place 'smorning.'

'Do you mean,' began Nicky, flushed and shy, 'do you mean——'

'I mean,' said Uncle Algy, chuckling and winking, 'we'll mebbe pick up a cheap pig or two, or a smart lil waggon, against the time when you have a farm to keep 'em on. That's all, boy. Just an idea of mine, just a passing thought. No schemes, you understand, no schemes. No, no, no!'

The car stopped. Tom Meadows, stiff and sulky, stood holding the door open. Towards Uncle Algy, but not at him, he looked with angry deference. Nicky had noticed that these two constantly grumbled at each other like old friends. To-day Uncle Algy was on the defensive: his glance at Tom was half timid, half impudent.

The moment Nicky's feet touched ground Tom shut the door on his employer. Uncle Algy stared indignantly. He tried bluster. 'Now Tom! Mind y'r manners.'

'That's all right, Mr Pandervil. I'll show Mr Nicholas round for you.'

'No such thing. Open the door and give me a hand out. Think I'm going to miss the party, and on me birthday too! Never heard such stuff.' He gave Nicky a confidential wink. 'Not really me birthday, y'know. That's only my lil joke. Well, Tom Meadows, are you going to do as I tell ye, or must I come and box y'r ears?'

Tom, unrelenting, wouldn't even grin. 'You know as well as me what doctor said.'

With a rueful grin Uncle Algy surrendered. 'A rare bully is our Tom. Didja know that, Nicky? Take a good look round, boy. And if you see any lil thing you fancy, a rake or a mowing machine or a couple of milking stools, just speak up and I'll see you get 'em. Money's no object.' He lay back among his cushions, rumbling with laughter. But by the time Nicky returned to him his mood had changed. 'Wish y'r dear dad could a bin with us to-day. Bad business him not able to come.'

'Dad! Was he to have come too!'

'Well, I wrote 'im a letter. One of my breezy letters, y' know, not saying much but giving 'im a lil bit of a nudge on the sly, if you take me. But seems he's bin seedy, y'r dad has, and won't venture out again yet.'

Nicky glared at his uncle accusingly. 'Dad's been ill! Why the devil didn't someone tell *me!* Hell, do they think I'm not interested in such things? What's wrong with him, uncle?'

'Eh, boy, don't excite y'rself. Touch of flu, that's all. Better now, he says. A good 'eal better. But not better enough to come with us to-day, more's the pity.'

Uncle Algy stared out of the window with dismal eyes. He was suddenly dispirited. Getting tired, thought Nicky; he'll be better for a meal. Rotten trick of Harold's, not letting on that Dad was ill. Blast. Blast . . . These blastings were designed to raise a dust of irrelevant anger in which he could hide from himself his anxiety about Egg. Flu at his age is serious, he couldn't help saying; and he thought of death and wished people didn't have to die. By people he meant other people, and especially old people; for that he himself shared this mortality was a notion he could seldom—and at this moment not at all—seriously entertain. He, by an astonishing piece of luck, was young, and only yesterday he had been in the presence of eternal light: a phrase that at last held a definite meaning for him. Instantly and with a sigh of adoration recalling that

face seen in church, and saying in his heart O Jane O Jane, he began to think that perhaps there was something real behind all that talk, to which he had listened so often and often so impatiently, about God and the Grace of God and the peace that passes understanding: something real, but certainly not the something that the Ebenezerites meant by it. Who is she, and how can I get to know her? Lovely, heavenly, an angel. Her darkness, the lovely darkness shining out of her. The way her eyes looked down, and her mouth, and when she flung her head back, and her beautiful chin like . . . like . . . How can I get to know her? A tune ran in his head, and scraps of poetry floated up from his memory. Impetuous heart, be still, be still: thy sorrowful love can never be told. I must get to know her soon. Next Sunday. No, tomorrow. I wonder if I'll be back in time to-night: I could just slip over to Upridge on the chance of finding out where she lives. And her name's Jane—perfect! Jane—it couldn't be anything else. There must be dozens in love with her; she's sure to be married or engaged or something. O Lord if I lose her! This very moment someone may be cutting me out, while I'm tied by the leg here. Still I shouldn't stand a chance anyhow, lovely girl like that. Black despair fell on him, but he soon went on planning how he could meet her.

'Did you speak, uncle?'

'Eh?' Uncle Algy was peevish.

'I thought you said something.'

'No.' He fussed with his watch. 'Late if he

don't look lively. Tom! Hi, Tom Meadows! . . .' He tried to get on to his feet to reach the speaking tube, failed, and sank back with a fierce grunt. 'Tell him, can't you! Rap on the thingummy.'

'But we're almost there now, uncle. See, it's only half-past twelve, and we're within ten minutes of Mercester. Sale's not till two, you know.' Seeing his uncle grow calmer he tried to comfort him further by talking of food. 'Don't know how *you* feel, but I'm ready for lunch.'

'You c'n 'ave mine too,' grumbled Uncle Algy. 'I shan't eat anything.' But in this belief he was mistaken, for when the waiter at the Coach and Horses brought him, with a most flattering bow, the bill of fare, he began to be himself again. 'Now, nephew, we must make a good lunch. Can't go to battle on an empty belly. We must fortify the inner man, as I used to tell y'r aunt in the old days.' He recalled the waiter. 'George old friend! —fetch me a wine list, will ye? You look at one, Nick, and I'll look at t'other, so that we can make a real job of it and no time lost. Got it, George? That's the style!'

The waiter knew Mr Pandervil well, and perhaps it was that, as much as the prospect of food, that heartened the old man. Indeed everybody knew him in Mercester, and it was quite like old times to be sitting in the dining-room of the Coach and Horses (an altogether grander place than the old Farmer's Rest had been even in its forgotten prime), nodding genially at this neighbour, cracking a loud joke with another, and having young-

sters of fifty or sixty jump up at sight of him and come to his table to pay their respects. 'Old Pandervil! Quite an old cure!' That's what they said of him, as he well knew, for he had overheard such things more than once; and, with that knowledge snug and warm inside him, and being wide awake to the glances and smiles his presence kindled in the company, it hardly needed George's highly recommended Old Madeira to put a sparkle in his rheumy eye. 'Glad to see you, Mr Jones. And how's things with you, old friend? This is my nephew and heir, Mr Nicholas Pandervil. Say how d'ye do to Mr Jones, Nick. A good friend of mine is Mr Jones. Many a fine beast I've knocked down to Mr Jones. Hey, Mr Jones? . . . Ah, here's young Mr Kitto come to tell me how many beans make five. That's so, isn't it, my dear fellow? This is my nephew Nicholas, farmer like y'rself, and chip of the old block, as you see. My brother's youngest. Nick, a word in y'r ear, boy. Mr Kitto here knows what's what. Went and married the prettiest young lady in Mershire, the young scamp. *I* asked her first but she dint hear me, so now she's Mrs Kitto.' He gave Kitto a confidential nudge. 'Only my fun, old friend.' A third acquaintance came into view. ' 'Pon my word if it isn't Mr Jennings! Glass o' wine, Mr Jennings. Glass of wine, Mr Jones. Now don't run away, Mr Kitto my dear boy, come and have a glass o' wine. George! Where's George! . . . We'll drink a health or two,' explained Uncle Algy, with a knowing wink at Nicky. 'We'll

drink success to the sale. Eh, Nick?'

So deeply engrossed did Uncle Algy become in talking and drinking with his cronies that he didn't offer to stir from his seat till Tom Meadows came to help him down to the billiard room, where the sale was on the point of beginning. Arranged as it was now, with rows of deal benches facing the auctioneer, the room reminded Nicky of the Ebenezer Sunday School, a resemblance strengthened by the solemn silence in which the auctioneer and his congregation stared at each other for a few preliminary seconds. There was but a sprinkling of people: nobody, it seemed, greatly cared to whom or for what price the Ridge Farm would be sold. And when the bidding began—'one thousand three, one thousand four, one thousand four, one thousand four, I'll take fifties, one thousand four fifty, and five to you, sir? one thousand five'—Uncle Algy, so little was he impressed (the knowing fellow!), found time to whisper caustic comments into Nicky's ear. 'Poor chap, he's new to it. Slow, very slow. I'd like to shew him how, I'd just like to shew him how. Half asleep the folks are, and no wonder. Doesn't know what he's about. Thinks he's bathing the baby by the sound of 'im. Hushabye baby on the tree-tops. That's not the way to sell a farm.' But presently his monologue died away, and people began to look round at him. There were audible whispers. 'Mr Pandervil's bidding.'

To Mr Pandervil the property was finally knocked down. 'That bit of money I spoke of,

nephew: you'll find it three thousand pounds short when you come to count it. And the farm's yours, boy.' He could hardly speak in his excitement, but with Tom and Nicky each lending him an arm he struggled to his feet again.

The auctioneer's clerk came, followed by the auctioneer himself eager to pay a compliment to his ancient rival. 'Don't disturb yourself, Mr Pandervil.'

Uncle Algy, as slowly as he had risen, sat down. 'Mr Nicholas, my nephew and heir. Never so happy in all my life.'

'Very gratified to see you here, sir. Congratulate you on securing a fine little property.'

Nicky, staring with mild curiosity at the author of these civilities, and liking the fellow, was surprised by the laugh with which Uncle Algy responded to it. It was a sibilant mirthless laugh; harsh and hard; and it went on and on. Looking quickly round, Nicky stammered out: 'Why, whatever . . . I say!' Uncle Algy's head was flung backwards across the back of his chair; his eyes were wide and staring; and from his mouth, which hung dribbling open, came a curiously mechanical noise like that of sawing.

They lowered him to the ground, loosened his collar, poured brandy into his mouth from Tom Meadows's pocket flask. They did all the usual things. And when he was dead the two young men for whom he was something more than a tedious or whimsical old fellow met each other's eyes. Tom Meadows, it seemed, had not yet forgotten his

grievance. 'I *told* 'im so!' grumbled Tom. 'That stubborn 'e was, he wouldn't listen.' For a moment he stared crossly at the dead distorted face; then, turning convulsively away, he burst into a loud blubbering.

4

Nicky's fancy that he and Jane had been made for each other was already become a deep-rooted habit of his mind. It was irrational and indefensible, but he stuck to it; and though, like every other lover, he tormented himself with the possibility of losing her, telling himself a hundred times a day that he wasn't worthy to be in the same world with such perfection as hers, he nevertheless thought of her already as his betrothed and sometimes even pictured her—mad presumption!—as his wife. To discover who she was and where she lived had proved no very difficult task. He seized the first opportunity of sneaking into Upridge Church when it was empty and examining the pew she had occupied with her mother (for surely it was her mother); and there, on the little disc of identification such as marked each of the rented pews, he read the name *Marsh*. This excited but did not content him: the evidence was not conclusive. He shamelessly pried into the flyleaves of the various devotional books that lay on the pew-ledge, and in one of them, a New Testament, was written in a prim schoolgirlish hand: *Eleanor Jane Marsh. 1907*. Jane! That's her! And that was

her handwriting four years ago—how delicious! Not always, now, was he so surely stirred by his thoughts of her: it needed, in fact, some concrete thing, some vestige of contact such as this scrap of her handwriting offered, to convince him of her reality; for of late the idea of her, that daydream at first so bright, had shone more dimly and required a more conscious rekindling. The suddenness of his uncle's death had shaken and bewildered Nicky, and for some few days after that event death had seemed the only fact worth taking any account of. To be alive and happy one moment, and dead the next—it made a mockery of everything. He looked with new eyes on his fellow creatures: doomed creatures, every one of them, and himself doomed too. Why do we put up with it! Why do we go on living and wanting to live, when at any moment this stupid horrible thing may happen to any one of us! It's like . . . it's like . . . like walking a tightrope over a precipice and knowing you'll fall sooner or later, perhaps this very minute, perhaps to-morrow. What's the use, then, of making plans and looking forward! And why—again he came back to that unanswerable absurd question—why do we put up with it, how can we bear it? Everyone knows the rope will break or he'll lose his balance or something, but we all go on pretending to forget it, pretending that it's worth while going on. It's a kind of crazy conspiracy, and we're all in it. Death's real, he said, death's permanent; and everything else is only a sort of game we play to stop ourselves thinking

about it. He didn't know that anyone had made this discovery before him, and he wondered at the blindness of the world, wondered how it was that this knowledge of death, the knowledge that is man's bitter privilege, did not poison for everyone, as it was doing for him, every minute of existence. But no sooner was the funeral over than he began to neglect the verdict of his logic, and to take the same unreasonable pleasure in being alive as he had taken before this ugly intrusion. He still asked sometimes why people consented to go on living on such humiliating terms; but meanwhile he himself fell into step with them; vital impulses drew his thoughts back from the encompassing darkness into our circle of candlelight. He remembered that he was in love, or thought he was—for now, in his most honest moments, he wasn't quite sure which. His pursuit of Jane's identity was carried out rather in the hope than in the certainty that she was as necessary to him as he chose to believe her; but now, sitting where she had sat that first time he saw her, and seeing the name, her own name, that her own hand had written—O Jane, his heart whispered, O my Jane!

The gods are said to look with disfavour on such extravagant presumption as Nicky's, and to punish the offender. But Nicky they indulged, not punished; contriving that he and Jane Marsh should happen upon each other in the church porch one Sunday evening, and so long after the beginning of evensong they had not the effrontery to go into the church.

And now—or never—he must speak to her. 'I'm afraid it's late.'

Taken by surprise, she looked at him with question in her glance. 'Yes.'

'Too late to go in, I mean.'

'Yes.'

That conversation was over. Nicky thought he had never seen anything so certainly finished, so dead and buried and hopeless of resurrection, as that conversation. But presently he tried again: 'Er . . . I've often seen you in church.'

Perhaps it was surprise that made her hesitate before responding. 'Have you?' She glanced quickly away. Her voice, though not unfriendly, was cool; its impersonality seemed to rebuke him. He wanted to say: 'Well, since we're too late for church, let's go somewhere else and have a talk.' That was clearly impossible, and equally impossible were all the alternatives he could think of. He felt awed, shy, apologetic, afraid of being thought an impudent fellow. He stared with troubled eyes at his boots, resolving to say no more and wondering whether he had best clear off at once. The silence became an intolerable embarrassment, but no sooner had he conceived the idea of instant flight than indecision paralysed him. Whether to say good-bye or to go without a word, that was the question. The first seemed cheeky, the second uncivil. Yet he felt he would go crazy if he had to stand here much longer, awkward and self-accusingly silent in her presence. His not looking at her was surely, he thought, as insulting

now as his looking had been before. He dragged himself a few feet away and pretended to be trying to read the parish notices, which were posted on the wall. So occupied, he heard her voice.

'I beg . . . Did you say . . . ?'

'In the ruin,' she repeated. 'There's a nest there with young ones in.'

It was sudden, but he rallied his wits. 'Oh, birds. Do you mean birds?'

'Yes. Finches, I think. It was looking at them made me so late. I simply daren't go in now, dare you?'

'No fear,' said Nicky, with enthusiasm. 'Where did you say the birds were?'

'In the ruin.'

For a moment, blankness; then Nicky remembered that behind the present church, with only a few yards of grass intervening, there stood an ancient ruin, roofless, ivy-covered, and believed to be a thousand years old. 'Oh I know. The ruined church.' She faintly smiled, perhaps at his slowness, perhaps recalling the sight of the nestlings. 'I wonder,' said Nicky, 'if I could find it. The nest I mean.' A wonderful hope dawned in his mind. 'Could you . . .'

'Yes, I'll tell you where to find it.' She stepped out of the porch, the better to direct him. His hope became dim, but he quickly joined her. 'It's on the outside of the big wall. That'll be . . . that'll be the south wall, won't it?' O desolation! His hope was quenched. 'The nest's about as high as me, so I've built a sort of platform to stand on,

with some of the old bricks lying about there.' She pointed him the way; and at sight of her standing in the sunlight, facing him unselfconsciously, one hand shading her eyes and the other pointing towards the ruined church, he had the sensation of being in a world beyond time and space, the thought flashing upon him: I shall never forget this, never; and, in the moment of her moving, that picture of her became for him imperishable.

She lowered her arm and turned slightly away as if in dismissal, and the gesture so deeply agitated him that he tried, desperately, one more cast of the net. 'I suppose you couldn't come and *show* me. I mean come and help me find it.'

She hesitated, shyly but not for long: for long enough only to make her consenting, when it came, a surprise as well as a rapture.

She set off through the churchyard, leaving him to follow. Her haste must mean, he thought, that she found his persistence tiresome and was anxious to be rid both of this task he had set her and of him. While he hurried after her he was planning to say something in extenuation of his conduct. But he happily forgot this plan when he saw her mount that step of piled bricks and heard her whisper 'Yes, here they are!' She jumped down, so that Nicky could take her place; and for an instant he almost forgot her in the first quick queer pleasure of seeing a cluster of small bird-mouths wide and confidingly open. He stared for a few seconds.

'Five of 'em,' he said, glancing down at the girl.

He had forgotten his shyness. 'Aren't they rummy things?' He grinned delightedly. 'They think everyone's their mother.'

She smiled. 'Little sillies!'

Nicky got down from the steps, feeling that he was on the threshold of heaven. The moment's perfection made him tremble. The sun was going down; the grass, to his senses, was darker than it had been five minutes earlier; and against that greenness Jane's white frock seemed to glow with her own light. The evening was full of those small remote sounds that are the breath of silence. Jane, her eyes big with listening, gazed at distance. Nicky gazed at her. He knew in this moment that hitherto his being in love with her had been three-parts make-believe: now it was real beyond question. Excited by the discovery he suddenly blurted out: 'I hope you didn't mind my speaking to you like that?' The question was not quite sincere, for he felt pretty sure she hadn't minded. And yet . . . he wasn't sure: he dared not be sure of anything but that she was perfect and he a clumsy fellow. A clumsy fellow indeed, he thought, and wished he hadn't asked her that stupid question, by which, he feared, he had thrown away his advantage, detroyed at a touch the intimacy that a shared pleasure had brought naturally into being. She glanced at him without answering, as though she didn't understand or as though his silliness had disappointed her. He could not be sure which of these two things her glance meant, but goaded by it into justifying himself he became filled with the

courage of madness and said: ' It may have seemed a bit cheeky. But it wasn't really, because I'm in love with you.'

She looked at him quickly, and as quickly looked away. 'What a funny thing to say!'

'Why?' demanded Nicky. He was bolder than ever now, for he saw that though taken by surprise she was not angry; above all, she didn't disbelieve him.

She shrugged her shoulders, half turning her back on him. There was a hint of petulance in the movement. 'Well, it *is*. That's why.'

Had he made a fool of himself? The fear added a suggestion of sulkiness to his voice. 'Funny or not, it's true. I'm most fearfully in love with you.' He wished the statement had not sounded so much like an ultimatum, a take-it-or-leave-it. He wanted above all to be eloquent, to tell her how beautiful she was, and how she had transfigured the world for him; he wanted to say that if he won her he would go crazy with joy, and that if he lost her she would still remain always the only meaning life could have for him. He could not say these things; his sense of having spoken too soon, and ineptly, robbed him of the power to do anything but blunder into a kind of quarrelsomeness. He felt as though he were made of wood: ungainly in movement, jerky in speech, incredibly clumsy in tactics. 'I say, do you believe me?' No answer. 'Hang it all, what's funny about it! I *am* in love with you, I tell you.'

Even then she delayed answering. She stood and stared at the ample curves of the horizon; interlocking and unlocking her fingers; and listening, but not, apparently, to what he said. From the church came the sound of chanting, to add one more touch of unreality to this experience, which was yet, in spite of everything, the most real experience Nicky had ever known.

He had all but lost hope of getting an answer out of her when she turned to him suddenly. 'But it's absurd. You don't know me. And I don't know you.'

Her voice was impatient, but behind the impatience there was something else, something in her tone and in her look that gave him hope.

'I *do* know you,' he protested. 'I've known for a month, exactly a month, that you're lovelier than anything else I've ever seen. What more is there to know than that!' She began studying the hills again. 'And I know your name too. It's Jane!' He made the statement excitedly, as though challenging her to deny it. 'So you see I do know you. And this evening we've talked, and we looked at those birds together, so why can't we be friends? Well, we *are* friends, anyhow.'

'There's no call to be so cross about it,' said Jane. She gave a little laugh that set his heart dancing. 'Who told you my name?'

'No one told me. I found out. I simply had to find out. And mine's Nicky. Nicholas Pandervil.'

Now that she stood face to face with him, smiling amusedly, he lost his courage and could think

of no more that he dared say. Her laugh, by opening the door to friendship, had made her mistress of the situation; and her smile made him blush for the impulsive storm of words that had provoked it. He felt that she was a good deal older and wiser than he, though he swore that she couldn't be a day over twenty and he was well over twenty-two.

5

The White Hart was the older, if not the better, of Keyborough's two inns; and the room chosen for the accommodation of Egg and Nicky was the landlord's special pride: a large low-ceiled room very rich in old oak, mellow with history, and slightly conscious, thought Nicky, of the handsome brick fireplace with which its present master had provided it. An illustrious somebody had once slept in this room, either a runaway king or a popular highwayman, for the story varied; and that deep cut in the window-sill had been made by the sword of Prince Charlie himself. Egg liked the room: its spaciousness impressed and delighted him. He liked the two neat little beds, and the log fire (such an extravagance at this time of the year); and he liked, above all, the prospect of sleeping here in the company of Nicky, who was at this very moment watching him out of his eye-corner, as they said in Mershire, and waiting anxiously for a sign of pleasure from him.

'A fine room, upon my word!'

'D'you like it, Dad?'

'Like it? Should think I do! Never slept in such a room in all my life. And a racketting big charge they make for it, I'll be bound.'

Nicky grinned with satisfaction. 'Not so much. Yes, it's a good room. But there are some pretty good rooms at the Ridge, aren't there?'

'I dare say. Me and y'r Uncle Algy had a biggish one between us, I seem to remember. But it's more than a bit since I saw the place. Hardly know it, I shan't.'

Egg became lost in silence, ruminating upon the marvel of this return to the scene of his boyhood. Two hours ago he had stepped out of the London train at Mercester station, whence he had been brought in a taxi—for this was a day of joyous and unbridled extravagance—to the White Hart; and tomorrow, in the same or another taxi, he would be taken to see over his son's farm. It was three months since his brother Algy's death, and he had not yet shaken off the load of melancholy it had burdened him with. It had made him think of all the other losses he had suffered in recent years, particularly those of his old friend Farthing, neighbour Pummice, and Carrie. The loss of Algy was less grievous than those, for indeed he had never been on very intimate terms with Algy, and the two for so many years had lived each his separate life that they met, and met rarely, almost as strangers, with only family sentiment and a sense of old times to bind them together. Perhaps that was why Egg had failed—foolishly, as he now thought—to ex-

pect his brother's death. He reproached himself for not having taken the trouble to see Algy oftener, and felt a bitter compunction when he remembered how, the summer before, spending a fortnight at that Old Vicarage of Algy's, he had found his exuberance a little trying, his heartiness monotonous: his company, in fine, a tax on patience. But it don't matter now. Nothing matters. Nothing matters except Nicky. The puzzle of it was that he had always had, in his absence, a real affection for Algy; at a distance that geniality had always been heart-warming, irresistible; it was now a poignant memory.

'I can't realize it even now,' said Egg, speaking his thought. 'Y'r Uncle Algy being gone I mean. It don't seem to make sense somehow. So full of fun as he was! Such a talker!' (For we persist in our naive habit of expecting Death to be more discriminating in his choice of victims than he has ever yet been.) 'I wish I'd seen a bit more of him, poor old chap.' Meeting Nicky's glance Egg was startled to think by how little he himself was younger than Algy. They call *me* a poor old chap, I shouldn't wonder. But I've got Nicky, and Nicky's got a farm. He stretched his thin hands towards the fire, for he suddenly felt cold, or thought he did, although it was summertime. 'So everything's settled to rights, my boy?'

'Yes,' said Nicky. 'There's been a lot of fuss and palaver, but everybody's been pretty decent about things, from Ambrose down to the solicitor johnny.' He began telling his father in detail the

story that he had summarized in his letters: how, within an hour of Uncle Algy's death, Ambrose the auctioneer had whispered with a sympathetic and deprecating grimace: 'Mr Nicholas Pandervil, would you mind stepping this way, sir? . . . I think I understood the late deceased gentleman to say that you were his heir. Yes? Ah yes. And my clerk is under the impression that this purchase was being made on your behalf. Is that so? Splendid. I have to ask these questions, Mr Pandervil, for in the ordinary way we might have to put up the property again in a case like this, if you see what I mean. Now may I take it, Mr Pandervil, that you intend to see the matter through? Ah you do. Very happy I'm sure. And your legal adviser would be . . . ?' Uncle Algy's solicitor proved to be 'a very good friend of ours, Mr Pandervil. Very happy I'm sure.'

Egg listened attentively to the story. 'Generous fellow y'r uncle. If only he coulda seen you settled down in y'r own farmhouse, he'd a bin as pleased as pleased . . . It's a queer feeling,' he went on, meaning it was queer to think that to-morrow he would be seeing the old place again. Some shyness made him leave the sentence unfinished, and he filled the gap by saying, half to himself: 'Well now you've a farm you'll be wanting a wife I spose, eh?'

Nicky parried with a grin. 'Better go to the Cattle Show to-morrow and see if we can find a likely one.' Egg took the chaff goodhumouredly, and Nicky couldn't resist elaborating his theme.

'A tall girl, don't you think? And strong of course —lots of work she'll have to do. Tall, about five feet six or five feet seven, what d'you say, Dad? Not too plump and not skinny. And black hair, or dark at any rate. None of your auburn stuff: it might clash with the butter. Black hair drawn back from the forehead and done up into a jug handle at the nape; rather prim and Quakerish, you know, but eyes very lively when they want to be.' He broke off, fearing that he was giving himself away.

'I see you've got the right idea,' said Egg, entering into the game. 'Ay, I like the sound of that well enough. But looks aren't everything, Nicky. Make sure you get a kind one, boy. It's a long business, is marriage.'

'Is she kind as she is fair?' quoted Nicky, still grinning so that he should not look as solemn as he felt. 'For beauty lives with kindness.'

Egg nodded, giving his son a searching glance. 'That's true. Who told you that now? It's true enough, I'm sure.'

'Shakespeare said it first. Let's have another log on the fire, shall we?'

Egg's eyes kindled. 'First fire I've ever seen in June. Tisn't a cold day either. You can't call it really cold. Yes I like that bit you said just now. I knew a bit of Shakespeare myself once. Got it by heart I did.' There was pride in him now.

'Did you?'

'Ay. Something about the lily, pause to mark the lily, and praise the deep . . . something in the

rose: it's gone now these many years. But I had it by heart once.' A feeling of tiredness came suddenly upon him. 'Well, I rather think I'll be turning in to bed. How d'you feel, my boy? Not ready for bed yet, I spose.'

'Oh, ready enough. I expect you're tired, Dad, after the journey.'

The old man was already getting out of his clothes. 'Not really tired. Well, p'raps a little. But not sleepy.' And, when presently he climbed into his bed, he repeated almost anxiously: 'I'm not sleepy, you know. We can go on talking, there's plenty to say yet. I shan't go to sleep for an hour or two, I fancy. But I just want to have a lie down.'

Nicky sat still for five minutes longer, finishing a cigarette. 'How do Harold and Lily hit it off together nowadays?' he asked, rising from his chair at last. There was no answer. Tiptoeing across the room, he saw that Egg was fast asleep.

He himself was soon in bed, thinking of Jane and wondering whether her mother, that time he went to tea with them, had liked him or not. He was alive to the importance of being liked by Jane's mother. She had seemed friendly enough, but could appearances be trusted? And what of Jane herself? There was no serious doubt in his mind of her friendliness, but beyond that he knew nothing. She was always serenely pleased to see him, and that, so far as he could see, was the beginning and end of it. Comparing Jane with her mother, a small brown-haired woman quiet

but alert, he decided that the girl must take after her father, a prosperous farmer of whom nothing more was known to Nicky than that he had been killed in the Boer War after serving six months as a Volunteer. For the twelve years since his death they had lived quietly at Upridge in a house whose atmosphere, created by Mrs Marsh, was that of old-fashioned and modest gentility. Nicky had never experienced anything quite like it before; it had for him the charm of an old print, the musty but evocative fragrance of pressed flowers; but he was vaguely uneasy to observe how Jane seemed to be assimilated by this atmosphere and so become less accessible to him. This quiet feminine world in which she lived with her mother, this world serene and a little sleepy—it had undeniable charm for a spectator, but it was no place, thought Nicky jealously, for a fine strong lovely girl like Jane, whose filial devotion at once enchanted and angered him. It made him guilty to know that he was trying to break into this domestic peace, bringing division where there was now nothing (it seemed) but placid affection; and the shame of that guilt made him the more fierce in his determination to steal the girl from her mother. He thought of marriage as though it had been a kind of treachery he was planning, for the urgency of his love made him impatient that anyone else should have a claim on her. And now he began wondering how much or how little of his hopes he should confide to his father, who couldn't, he felt, be expected to understand. He must have been in love

some time or another, but he'll have forgotten what it feels like by now, and say I'm too young or some stuff. I wonder what he'd think of Jane if he saw her. With these last thoughts he drifted into sleep and did not wake until roused by strong sunlight and the sound of water being splashed into a basin.

'Hullo, farmer!' said Egg. 'I'm up first, you see.'

Egg was in high spirits: unnaturally high spirits, thought Nicky, for so early in the morning. He hoped he wouldn't over-excite himself, and the implied fear found its justification soon enough in the feverish gleam that lit the old man's eye as he sat back in the cab watching the hedges fly past. Nicky was excited, too, though not for quite the same reasons as Egg had.

Being on the point of making dangerous conversation, he felt almost breathless with stage-fright. Yet his voice sounded sufficiently cool when at last he began: 'Do you remember Upridge?'

'Eh? Upridge?' Egg looked blankly, but wouldn't admit ignorance of anything in Mershire. 'Yes, I remember. Let me see . . .' His tactics were successful; having gained time he now did indeed remember that there had been a village of that name somewhere on the fringe of his boyhood's world. 'You mean the village?'

What else was there to mean? There was only one Upridge and that a village. Nicky saw through his father's deception. Poor old Dad, he's forgotten. 'Yes. Jolly little village. Quite near Crabbe's place, you know. I sometimes went over

there to church on Sunday evenings.'

'Went to church, did you? Yes, I remember you saying in one of your letters about going to church. Well I used to go to church myself in the old days at the Ridge. It was y'r poor mother got me into the chapel. Y'r granddad Pandervil would no more a thought of going inside a chapel than of making his own bed.'

Nicky nodded appreciation. 'I don't blame him. Do you?'

'Me and y'r uncles used to take it by turns. When we could be spared, for there's always something to be doing on a farm, off we'd go with Flisher or Sarah to church. The Guv'nor dint go but on special days. He stayed at home and shut himself up with his books. A rare one for books, and a head for 'em too. I sometimes fancy you're a bit like him, Nicky. He'd have thought the world of you, my boy. Moren he ever did of us lot.' Egg shone with pride in being so richly excelled by his son.

Upridge seemed forgotten, but Nicky took care to come back to it. 'I met some people at Upridge. Church people. At least they go to church now and again. I think the mother comes of Quaker stock.'

'What sort of folks are they? You dint tell me you'd met anybody new, as I can remember.'

'Their name's Marsh.' Nicky was already wishing he hadn't begun this difficult story.

'Young fellow like yourself, I spose? Is he a farmer too?'

'There aren't any men. Sort of hen party.' Nicky contrived to laugh. 'Just mother and daughter living by themselves.'

'H'm!' Egg waited to hear more.

'Quite nice people,' said Nicky. 'Been very decent to me.'

'How did you meet 'em?'

'Oh, I just met them. Sort of got to know the daughter.' He tried to make the talk more general. 'Funny how you meet people, isn't it. A chance word or two and so on.' Egg gravely agreed, his heart warm; and Nicky, encouraged by his gravity, could not forbear telling him: 'There were some birds nesting in the wall of the old church, the ruined one. And we got into conversation about it.'

'You and Mrs Marsh. I see,' said Egg innocently, with hardly a smile.

'Not Mrs Marsh. Her daughter it was. Jane, they call her.'

A good name that, thought Egg. Jane Marsh: a good honest name. 'Sounds a pleasant body, this Jane.'

'She is,' agreed Nicky: not with enthusiasm, but rather with the air of one determined to be just. 'Oh, quite pleasant. And quite young. A child almost. Only just twenty, I think they said.'

'She'll be pretty, I dare say,' ventured Egg.

'In a way,' Nicky agreed. 'Pretty's not exactly the word. But good-looking, yes. You might almost say beautiful.'

'Tall, I expect?' suggested Egg.

'Yes, tall and sort of fine-looking.' He was warming to his theme. 'The kind of face a sculptor would be attracted to. A sculptor rather than a painter, if you know what I mean. There's something very open and generous about it, and yet . . . oh, I dunno. What I was going to say was they've been pretty decent to me, asked me to tea and sort of took an interest, lonely young man and all that. I thought it might be the polite thing if we were to run them over to see this farm of ours.'

Egg was taken aback for a moment. 'What, this morning?'

'Oh, not if you'd rather not. I could tell the driver to turn at the toll-gate and take a short cut through Winsted Rising. But it was only a passing thought of mine. We'll not bother now.'

After a silence Egg said suddenly: 'I like the sound of that young woman. Jane, d'ye call her? Tell me more about her, won't you?'

'Told all I know,' said Nicky.

'You said she was tall, didn't you?'

'Tallish.' Nicky stared out of the window. 'Toll gates,' he remarked, desperate to say something.

'About five foot six?' asked Egg with a twinkle.

'Oh, about that, I spose.'

'And lots of black hair, dint you say? And pulls it straight back from her forehead and does it in a little bun at the back. Eh?'

Nicky blushed in meeting his father's glance.

'Now how the dickens did you know that, Dad?' he asked, though he knew well enough.

'Never you mind!' said Egg. 'Have I got it right?'

'Near enough. But how——!' He still had to pretend.

Egg jumped up, put his head out of the window, and shouted to the driver. The car stopped. 'D'you know Upridge, young man? Well, you'll have to turn and go back a step or two. Back to the toll-gate, d'ye see? . . . And then take the road through Winsted Rising.'

'But I say!' Nicky took alarm, seeing his plan put so unexpectedly into effect. 'Do you think we'd better? It's another twenty miles pretty near. And she's—they're not expecting me. They may be out.'

All the way to Upridge Nicky was restless and preoccupied, hardly answering when spoken to. Egg, stealthily watching him, suffered and rejoiced. He did not for many minutes share his son's anxiety, for the years had not taught him pessimism, and seeing that Nicky was in love with this Jane he had no doubt at all that he would win her. His only fear, which he dared not boldly face, was that she should bring trouble to her lover; and when she alone, and not her mother, was handed into the cab—for it all fell out as Nicky had recklessly planned—she was so touchingly shy, and Nicky so awkward and so radiant, that Egg hadn't the heart to take careful stock of her. He thought on the whole he liked her looks, but now,

the prospect of seeing the Ridge Farm being so near, he was glad enough to absent himself in spirit for a while from these young people, who looked as eagerly forward as he looked wistfully back, and to indulge his many memories.

The car began climbing Saffron Ridge, and a quietness enclosed him into which the voices of his companions could not penetrate; but, when the time came for him to get out, nothing was left in him but an expectant curiosity. It was all so long ago, that past in which he had been living for a strange hour or so, that he could not identify himself, as yet, with the young fellow he remembered; it was easier far to identify himself with Nicky, in whose life his own was so marvellously and at times sensibly extended. Yet entering the farmhouse kitchen, he was startled almost into asking 'Where's Mother?' And, going to the window, from which the cobbled yard was visible, he stood gazing and forgetful at his vanished boyhood, scarcely rousing when Nicky said: 'Sit down for a bit, Dad. I'll show Jane the rest of the house while you're resting.' There was sunlight in the yard, and Egg, unfastening the window with fingers that remembered even more than he did, stretched out his hands towards it. He leaned out, slantwise, to get a glimpse of the dairy, of which the door stood half-open: a sight that kept him staring for a long while, longer than he knew, till at last he caught himself expecting to see his young sister, Felicia, come out of that dairy carrying an empty pail hung from her arm and screwing up her

eyes in the strong sunlight. That barn's new. Spoils the place, that barn does. There was no one in the yard: it was deserted; no life except the life his memory peopled it with. His eyes saw what they saw, but into his mind crowded the fields beyond, the cart-track between two high hedges, the orchard, the twelve-acre plough, the green valley, and the long slope to the field they had called Flinders; and he was again with his brothers, ploughing, scything, trimming hedges, loading hay. It was strange, marvellous, and at the last unbelievable, that that had once been real, a living present reality, and now was nothing but an old tale. . . .

He turned at a sound in the room behind him, and, seeing a young man and a young woman come smiling towards him he made as if to cover his eyes with his hand, as though fending off the intrusion.

'Hullo, Dad! Sorry we were so long away.' Nicky stared anxiously. 'Not feeling bad, are you?'

His son's voice recalled him. 'No, no, my boy. I'm right enough.' He noticed that the boy and the girl were hand in hand, and he guessed them to be full of their tremendous secret. He smiled, looking from one to the other.

The two came nearer. 'Jane and I——' said Nicky, and no more words would come.

'That's a good boy!' Egg gave them each a trembling hand. He was proud and glad. But when his glance came to rest at last on Jane, whom

pride and gladness had transfigured, his eyes dimmed and the pain of unbearable beauty shot through his heart. All the years of his life were distilled into one sweet, one bitter drop. I must get away, I can't bear any more of it. He longed to be safe back in his shop at Farringay.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH

THE WAITING

I

Pansy, the most ladylike of cows, had sprained her leg and was suffering. She stood in the near orchard meekly enduring the attentions of her two masters. 'Come along, my beauty!' said old Egg Pandervil; and gently, but with a secret rapture of which his son Nicky was more than half-aware, he applied a handful of yellow ointment to the swollen joint and began rubbing it in. 'You're a wonder, Dad!' But it did not need Nicky's remark, which he cunningly pretended not to hear, to make Egg happy, for nowadays everything was conspiring to his happiness. He was in Mershire; his son was a farmer, and he was the father of his son: that was enough. After half a century of exile he was back where he belonged, living on the very soil he had himself farmed as a lad, and moving among sounds and smells and beasts that were like the incidents of an old beloved story miraculously made actual. And it gave him profound satisfaction to know himself—despite the variety of new habits learned during that exile—still countryman enough, and farmer enough, to do

more for Pansy than ever that smart young vet at Mercester could have done. Nothing to do but put the poor creature out of its pain—that, he told Nicky, was what they all said, and that was what this fellow would say if he were given a chance. 'Steady, my lass!' murmured Egg. 'I'm making it well again, that's what I'm doing.' Continuing the massage, he rested his head gratefully against the cow's flank. The smell of the animal was pleasant in his nostrils; her solid bulk reassured him; he was home again. Moreover, the cow was getting better, thereby affording one more piece of corroborative evidence that he hadn't lost his country nous. On days when strength assailed him he could plough as straight a furrow, build as fine a stack, and with bottle and shears as dexterously tend a maggoty sheep as young Nicky himself could. He would draw water from the deep well with never a sick glance—such as Nicky couldn't forbear giving—into that hideous hole; he would tar a fence with the enthusiasm of a child; and nothing pleased him better, in those early days, than to take a scythe and mow down a few of the thistles that disgracefully choked the valley meadow. At seventy-five his strength wasn't what it had been; but, though he could not do everything, he could do enough to feel that he was of some use to the place. He was forever poking about the farm at Nicky's side, helping, advising, hindering maybe, with his 'Here, lemme have a go, Nicky!' and 'Now this is the way 'twas done in *my* time.' Nicky, admiring and teasing the old man in the

same breath, divined at last the secret of this strange zest of his: it was that every fresh task yielded him not only proof of his capacity but the bitter-sweet delight of reminiscence. What Nicky could not know was the exact proportions in which were mixed the fancies, the feelings, and the history of which this reminiscence was compounded. More often than not there was no conscious memory of the past, but only a flavour, subtle and satisfying; though sometimes, with a bill-hook in his hand, or squatted in the byre and watching the milk warm from the udder spurt resonantly into the pail, Egg did play at pretending he was back for an instant in the past. Yet he was aware—now and again, but not often, mournfully aware—that the essential quality of that past eluded him. Everything looked the same, or nearly so; but everything was different. It was nothing—or at least it was no more than a little disconcerting—that where men in his time had mowed grass with a scythe and reaped corn with a sickle they now used a machine drawn by horses; and nothing—except an occasion for genial sneering—that chemical manures were the fashion, and the rotation of crops a solemnly deliberated affair. The difference went deeper than that; it was in the very nature of things. Or was it, perhaps, in himself alone? Yet he did not think of himself as old, and it was sometimes the queerest thing to realize what a great gulf of years divided him from Nicky and Jane, and he caught himself wondering how and why he came to be pent in this old body, he and

his rich treasure of memories. This new life bred strange thoughts, and none more strange than the fancy, only half playful, that his marriage and his life at Farringay were things that had never really happened. Yes, they had happened, but not so truly as things happened here on the farm; too real for a dream, maybe, but surely not real enough for full, waking life. Boyhood itself seemed less remote than that lifetime of grocering.

He stepped a pace back from the cow and regarded his work with satisfaction; then stooped, with grunting difficulty, to wipe his hands on a tuft of grass. The cow turned her large purple irises towards the two men; she did not look at them, but she saw them. Nicky for an instant idly wondered what slow dim thought or dream went on behind that bovine mask: precisely the kind of question that Egg had once been in the habit of asking himself, but for a very long time now he had finished with such fancies and forgotten them. 'She's mending, my boy,' he said. Nicky agreed. 'Thanks to you, Dad.' And suddenly, out of nowhere as it seemed, there drifted into Egg's mind the beginning of a memory. He stood, staring at distance, listening to a silence in himself.

'What is it, Dad?'

'Funny,' said Egg, with a wondering smile. 'Something just popped into my head. A brother of mine. The eldest he was.'

'Not Uncle Algy,' asked Nicky.

'No, Algy was the middle one. The eldest. Now what did we call him? . . . Willy we called

'im. Sakes alive, I haven't thought of Willy for a many years. Now what should have put *him* into my head, I wonder!'

'Was that the brother that was killed at Inkerman?'

'Inkerman? Battle of Inkerman? Why, so it was. Wasn't much older than you, wasn't Willy, when a was killed. Queer, that is. If I was to meet him now, same as it might be in the next world as they say, young Willy'd be a mere nipper side of me, woont he?'

Nicky considered. 'I reckon he would. Rum idea that. But I tell you what, Dad. You might not even recognize each other. How about that?'

'Not recognize him!' said Egg indignantly. 'Not recognize my own brother!' He stared blankly, and then added, with mild surprise in his voice: 'Well, I hadn't thought o' that. P'raps you're right.' He tried to recall Willy's image, but could find nothing but the faintest vaguest pencil sketch of a young man in a red coat. He felt puzzled and a little lonely. And he had a sense of the injustice of his predicament. He was the same Egg Pandervil as he had always been; however many years he had lived, he had not changed his identity, and the notion that young Willy, his elder brother, could regard him as an old man was absurd, though not quite absurd enough to be instantly dismissed. The old men of his own youth, with their white hairs and their bent backs, had seemed to be an alien race, almost an alien species, having little or nothing in common

with his own; but now he knew, he had cause to know, better than that. Old or young, one felt much the same inside: perhaps nowadays less hopeful, less greedy, less expectant, but fundamentally the same, and, but for the aches and pains of the body and the tiresomeness of taking care of oneself, wonderfully contented.

Nicky said, as though reading his father's thoughts: 'You like being here, don't you?'

'Eh? Like being here?'

'Yes, here on the farm with Jane and me?' The boy spoke shyly, and turned away, afraid of his sentiment.

'Why, yes,' said Egg. 'What more could I want than this?'

'Yes, you're properly settled in now. Just at first I thought maybe the change was too much for you.'

'Nonsense!' Egg chose to forget that period of queer, cruel disappointment, when his beloved Mershire had seemed strange to him and he had hungered, perversely, to be back in his old shop. 'You and Jane, I've got all I want, boy. Set your mind easy, my dear. . . . Unless,' he added, and paused in hesitation.

'What else, Dad?'

Egg turned the question aside. 'Time enough for that.' He took his son's arm and they sauntered slowly towards the house. 'Don't like the look of that French barn, as you call it. Don't know what possessed 'em to go putting it there.'

This by now was ancient controversy. 'Pretty

useful though,' said Nicky.

'Spoils the character of the place. *We* got along well enough without it, me and your Uncle Algy. And that gate too! What they want to go altering everything for? They've picked the place to bits seemingly, and then put it together again all anyhow.' Nicky being silent, his father added after a pause: 'This yard now! I'd hardly know it. Let alone what they've done to the house.'

Lifting his eyes the old man saw Jane standing outside the back door looking towards them with her hand shading her eyes from the sunlight. The poise of her body, young and lissom, spoke a new maturity. A fine lass he thought, and his eyes rejoiced in the sight of her. A fine lass and well mated to his son. 'There's Jane,' he said.

'Yes,' answered Nicky. 'Looking for us, I expect.' He smiled at his father's enthusiasm.

Egg waved an eager hand to the girl. 'Coming, my dear.' She waved back and turned into the house. Egg suddenly stopped in his walk. 'I know,' said he. 'I remember now, Nicky. Well. *there's* a queer thing to happen!' Nicky's face questioned him. 'Why, brother Willy. That's what I mean. Why I thought of him was this way. The orchard and Pansy it was that put it into my head. That's where I was the day we heard about him being killed.'

'Pansy?' echoed Nicky. 'What's Pansy got to do with it?'

'Tell you I was in that very same bit of an

orchard. And there was a sick cow there. Same as it might have been this morning. And your Uncle Algy come running up to me face as white as a sheet. "Egg, my dear fellow, it's all up with poor Willy," he says. "Died like a hero," says he. And those were his very words.' Egg smiled triumphantly to find his memory so good.

Jane greeted them with a question. 'How's Pansy?'

'Mending,' said Egg. 'Ah, we can teach 'em a thing or two yet, Nicky and me.'

She smiled maternally at him. 'Ready for your dinner, I expect.' They took their places round the kitchen table. Nicky carved the cold joint; Egg poured the cider; Jane, at the sink, emptied steaming potatoes from her heavy iron saucepan into her bright new tureen. Nicky's eyes were on his task; he was not quite the boy he had been a moment ago, outside. Egg couldn't make it out, this strangeness in the house. It was a puzzle and a worry to him. His own glance, following the girl as she moved about the room, rested affectionately on her broad gentle face, whose beautiful candour, like Nicky's own, was now veiled, it seemed; but by what veiled? Not by anger, or at least not by confessed anger; not by unkindness, unless it were an unkindness hidden out of sight far below the surface of those calm eyes. Not by anything that Egg could give a name to. Yet he couldn't resist the suspicion that all was not quite as it should be between Nicky and Jane. They had been married two years now, and

there was no sign of a child. Did that mean anything or nothing? Well, said Egg to himself, times have changed a bit in that way, and no bad thing either perhaps, though I don't hold with all I hear. And so saying he dismissed the subject from his mind; or, at least, he gave it a nod of dismissal, and if thereafter it remained, to pester him at intervals, it was by no permission of his.

Not till the late evening, when Egg after his bread and cheese and milk had gone to bed, were the lovers left alone together; and then the constraint weighed still more heavily upon them. They sat in silence for half an hour, a silence which, though each laboured to break it by an occasional remark, survived all trivial interruptions. Nine o'clock had struck, and this was a traditionally sacred hour when they could sit together, the long day's work done at last, and taste lingeringly the sweets of their comradeship; but to-night, and for many nights past, it had been an hour quickening with anxiety and breeding discomfort between them. Two years of marriage, while diminishing the fever of delight, had deepened their love, which nowadays they were apt to express not in the old way, of frequent passionate avowals, but by various devices of indirection, by banter and mock-quarrelling and comical abuse: in which fashion they had invented between them a whole system and vocabulary of private nonsense that was more intimate than an embrace. And if these exchanges were a frequent substitute for loving demonstration they were sometimes perhaps a sub-

stitute for that communion of mind of which Nicky had once dreamed. His marriage with Jane was beautiful and imperfect: it filled him and left him hungry. She was inarticulate; she astonished him alike by her wisdom and her ignorance, the wisdom of a child, the ignorance of one who resists knowledge of which the relevance to personal life is not immediately perceived. During their first year together Nicky somehow contrived in his spare time to write two acts of a poetic drama; and Jane listened to his reading it aloud, and loved him: loved his profile, his voice, the light in his eyes, and loved him for being able to write such difficult things. Her glance was fond and wistful, like that of a mother who is both gratified and intimidated by her child's cleverness. When he looked up to meet it she said with guilty haste: 'That *is* nice, Nicky! What a wonderful boy you are!' He smiled love at her, but he felt lonely and frustrated, realizing that she had not understood a word of his darling work. 'Well, now comes a little song by way of interlude.' She can't miss this, he thought. 'Janey, you remember that day we went across the hills to Up Elston?——' But no, the idiom of verse utterly obscured his meaning from her. She greeted the lyric with a face rendered all but blank by the effort to conceal her unresponsiveness, a face that would have been null and void but for that hunted look, that desperate anxiety not to disappoint him. 'Yes, I do like that,' she said. Heroic pretence! The pitiful gallantry of it made him fling his manuscript down and take

this lovely perplexed child into his arms. She received his kisses gratefully, glad to be comforted, and—though he hated himself the moment after—he could not quite stifle the thought: Yes, she understands this: a thought that was followed, after a long bitter interval, by its antidote—I'm not much of a poet, anyhow: Jane's poetry itself, the darling! . . . But he wasn't altogether convinced by this pretty pleading.

Since then, though his literary ambitions were far from dead, he talked to her in the evenings of matters nearer home, of sowing and reaping and breeding. The farm he never quite succeeded in seeing through his father's beglamoured eyes: he was inclined still to resent it because it was a destiny not of his own choosing. But it was his work and he accepted it, recognizing its wholesome qualities and enjoying its compensations, chief among which was Jane herself. It was good, it was good indeed, to come back after a hard day in the fields, or a disappointing day at market, to the comfort and rich plenty of Jane. In many ways, as he had to admit when taking stock of it, his situation was perfect. He possessed, at twenty-five, not only a farm of his own, and the wife he had wanted and still loved, but—in the person of his father—a veteran farmer to share the responsibility with him; for though Egg, after so deep a lapse of years, was at first almost as much pupil as teacher, it took him surprisingly little time to pick up the dropped threads. No doubt Nicky knew his job better, in fact, than Egg did; it was rather in enthusiasm that

Egg pointed the way. Egg's enthusiasm was infectious up to a point, and even beyond that point Nicky was obliged to put a good face on it; for to have confessed to discontent would have been to disappoint an eager child. His chief lack was the companionship of his own kind. Nicky, one might almost say, missed something he had never fully experienced. But in imagination, which had school memories to work upon, he had experienced it; he knew that somewhere in the world there was good talk to be had, ideas to be exchanged, fine theories to be filled with words and sent ballooning among clouds of tobacco smoke. Men, men who wrote for the newspapers, were meeting every day in Fleet Street taverns and talking philosophy over their beer: this was Nicky's picture of the journalistic life, and he would have given anything, he thought, to be in it. How wonderful in the midst of a roaring argument about Plato (one of Nicky's fourpenny-box discoveries) to be interrupted by the 'printer's devil clamouring for copy'! How magnificent to dash off a column or two on the spot, with this same devil at one's elbow (his traditional post) and then order another drink as if nothing unusual had happened! But, above all, how intoxicating to hear good talk!—his thoughts, however far they went romancing, always came back to their starting-point. No doubt he wanted to discuss Beauty and Art and similar solemnities proper to his age, and to savour the grandeur of such discussions; but there was more to it than that, for he was consumed by a genuine passion for ideas.

Ideas visited him that were beyond, though not far beyond, his technique of expression; ideas bubbled in his mind, needing release and clarification; ideas came visiting him as he went about the farm. And having no one who could or would listen to him he was driven to confiding his thoughts to a diary; later he overflowed into essays and stories. Being a farmer and being married did not leave him much opportunity for this secret literary indulgence, and often, for weeks at a time, he allowed it to be crowded out. But on reading he stubbornly insisted. He had puzzled Jane, perhaps wounded her, by getting for his own use a camp-bed which he stuck in a corner of their room, with a bookshelf near it and a folding screen to shut in his candlelight, so that he might with an easy conscience read for a while before sleeping. His books included a couple of hundred English classics, a sprinkling of red sevenpennies, such volumes of the Home University Library as treat directly of literature or philosophy, and two volumes of Plato's Dialogues, very much tattered and very precious, for, as Chapman to Keats, so to Nicky Pandervil was the translator of the Apology. These were his friends, and he had few others. With no one outside his household to exchange a word with but people like Fred Curtis, who hadn't a notion beyond crops, and Harry Swan, who was everlastingly grumbling about the Government, and old Smart, his father's acquaintance, who drove by the farm every Sunday morning on the way to church and always stopped at Pandervil's to cadge a glass

of cider, Nicky sometimes felt like Robinson Crusoe.

But to-night quite other feelings were occupying him, and in the hope of hiding them from Jane he struggled to make conversation with her. Yet they could not for ever be hidden, and it was almost with relief that he heard her say, impatiently brushing aside his laborious banter:

'Nicky, we can't go on like this, can we?'

Meeting her troubled glance he answered soberly: 'No, my dear, we can't.'

'It's a misery, that it is.' Jane spoke indignantly, but without the least trace in her tone of anger against Nicky. 'Better speak your mind, Nicky. It isn't like you to keep me so much in the dark.'

Jane bent again over her darning and waited for Nicky's revelation.

Nicky said: 'Dad's getting to be an old man now. Not far short of eighty, you know.'

'Yes.' Recognizing Nicky's circuitous method of approach, Jane displayed no impatience. 'He'll be seventy-eight.'

'And he's dropping out of things,' complained Nicky. 'I don't mean the farm. He's crazy keen on the farm, we all know. But outside things don't seem to mean anything to him.'

'What sort of things?'

Nicky stared with frowning affection at the brown head bent over a bundle of mending. 'Well, take this morning, for instance, out in the near orchard with old Pansy. Dad was full of a brother of his that got knocked out in the Crimean War.

The *Crimean* War, Jane! Think of it!'

'What made your father think of it?'

'Oh, seems he was in that very same orchard when Uncle Algy brought him the news. It's rather terrific, that. A rum feeling. But the strange thing was that all the time he was talking about it he never once remembered *our* war, the real war. I say, Jane, do you realize it's been going on for close on twelve months?'

'What has?'

'This bloody war.' His violence startled her: she looked quickly up. 'And I'm about at the end of my tether.'

She wouldn't help him. She obstinately wouldn't help him. 'What do you mean, end of your tether?'

'I mean I must take a hand in it,' said Nicky. He spoke curtly, because the effort to give utterance to this decision left no smoothness in his voice. 'I'm going to join up,' he added, being resolved to leave her no scope for further equivocation.

'Oh Nicky! Haven't we had all that out before?'

'This is different,' said Nicky. 'I've made up my mind, Jane. I've got to go. I shan't respect myself if I don't.'

Jane dropped her pretences and rose from her seat to face him with anguished eyes and trembling lips. And now there was anger in her voice. 'Who's been getting at you?'

'No one.'

'There were some soldiers hanging about the yard t'other day. Did they talk you round?'

'Of course not.' Nicky flushed under this catechism, feeling like a schoolboy again. 'They only said what had been in my own mind long enough.'

'Ah, they were from the Recruiting Office at Mercester, were they?'

'What if they were!' Good Lord, thought Nicky, are we actually quarrelling, Jane and I!

'Did you tell them the doctor wouldn't pass you for the bank?'

'Oh that!' said Nicky contemptuously. 'That was years ago. I'm fit enough—always have been. Besides, anything on two legs'll do for the army now.' Seeing her implacable face he fell to brooding awhile; then said: 'Most girls *want* their men to go. They'd be ashamed of a man hanging back.'

'I'm not one of that sort,' said Jane. 'D'you wish I was?'

'No.' He couldn't, even for the argument's sake, pretend that. 'Of all sickening sights the Female Jingo is the worst. It's that kind of cattle started the whole thing, I dare say — bloody-minded half-wits, greybeards, old women. But we've been dragged into it and we've got to see the job through. Can't let those chaps go ramping through Europe as they please.'

'Why can't we?' asked Jane woodenly.

Nicky shrugged his shoulders. 'Think what happened in Belgium. You wouldn't expect me to stand by and look on if that kind of thing happened here, on this farm. Would you now?'

Jane was quietly and desperately weeping.

Through her tears she managed to say: 'If I could come with you I wouldn't mind. It's stupid. It's wicked. It won't save Europe, you being killed. Millions of people being killed won't save anything.'

Dimly discerning a truth in her words, he yet stood and stared at her, perplexed by her attitude. So lovely and so simple-minded a creature, why did she not take the simple-minded view of this war, and believe without question what the newspapers told her day after day? Yet perhaps it was this very simple-mindedness in her that made her cling stupidly he thought, to her conviction of the wickedness of people's hating and killing each other, and made her refuse to listen to argument. She was so sound at core, so wise in her instinctive judgments, that he was the more exasperated by her deafness to reason. Even the blessed word Belgium failed to shake her. She could not or would not see why men who had no quarrel with each other as individuals should fly at each other's throats to oblige their masters. And once, when Nicky began enumerating the reasons, she had remarked infuriatingly: 'I don't know, I'm sure, about that. But Jesus told us to love one another.' What—asked Nicky of himself—what can you do with such a woman?

And now, harrowed by her tears, he could only say, 'Don't cry, Janey! Don't cry, please!' He stroked her hair soothingly. But both words and action lacked the perfect ease of spontaneity: her emotion, though he shared it, made him feel self-

conscious, because there was still a fundamental disagreement dividing them. There was, indeed, open conflict now: he having decided to go fighting, with or without her consent, and she being resolved, it seemed, to oppose his going by every device her wit could invent. He had never loved Jane so much as at this moment, but he loved her at the expense of this new Jane, this enemy, this bitterly weeping woman who had displaced the Jane he knew. To think of her as a stranger provided some defence against the agony of knowing that he was about to leave her.

Her weeping subsided, and as they climbed the stairs together she remarked in a drowsy voice: 'My word, I'll not need rocking to-night. I'm that tired.' It was as if her tears had washed away all the accumulated trouble in her heart. Yet Nicky's self-consciousness persisted. He felt, against all reason, guilty, as though this thing that he was planning to do—fight in his country's cause—were a subtle treachery cloaked in heroic khaki. In the bedroom he was tongue-tied, being embarrassed by a new indecision. Because he was lonely, because Jane seemed shut away from him, he wanted to sleep by her side, comforted by the knowledge of her nearness; and for the same reasons he found it impossible to raise the question, impossible not to do as he had done for some few nights past—set up his separate candle, arrange his screen, and take a book from the shelf. And for five minutes after Jane had got into her bed he remained standing with an open book in his hand, pretending to be

absorbed by what he read and trying trying to make himself say: 'I don't much want to be alone tonight, do you Jane?' But he couldn't say it; the words wouldn't come.

And presently Jane, calling a soft 'Good night', blew her candle out.

He crossed the room to where she lay. Bustling a little, to hide his nervousness, he re-arranged the bed-clothes for her. 'Good night, Janey!' Bending down he gave her a quick shy butterfly kiss and in a moment was gone back to his own corner.

He lay in the darkness and despaired of sleep. A tide of misery rolled over him when he tried to remember all the things that would have to be done. First he would see the harvest in, a matter of not many weeks. Then he would have to talk to his father. No, better join first and talk after. And I must make a will, he thought—for the idea that he would never come home again was present to his mind, though just now it troubled him less than did these minor anxieties. So long as Jane's all right, and the old governor. . . . He woke, astonished to find that he had been asleep. A thin shaft of moonlight fell like a pointing finger upon the bed where Jane lay quietly sleeplessly thinking. Nicky, listening to her breathing, knew at once that she had been awake all night.

'Are you awake, Janey?'

His voice was thick with drowsiness; hers was quiet and clear. 'Yes.'

'It's hot, isn't it! Can't you sleep?'

'No.'

'Nor can I,' he said, and closed his eyes and was away again.

Next time he woke someone was kneeling at his bedside. 'Hullo, Jane!'

'I was hot,' she answered. But her voice seemed to belie her, so calm was it, so grave, so deeply controlled; her eyes were large and dark and lustrous with profound thought. 'I was hot. I've been sitting by the window with nothing on.'

'Darling! Didn't you feel cold?'

'Yes, so I wrapped myself up in this thing.'

'What is it?' He put out a hand to touch it.

'The eiderdown.'

He sleepily stroked her shoulder. 'Funny girl!'

'I've been thinking, Nicky.'

He roused himself to sit up and attend to her.

'If you're going away from me,' she said after a pause, 'I must have a child.'

'But——'

His mind was full of prudent objections, but she put two fingers lightly on his lips. 'Hush, hush!'

She rose to her full height and lifted her arms so that the covering slipped from her like water from the shoulders of a swimmer and she stood revealed in her lovely perfection, austere in the moonlight. He trembled as he took her in his arms.

2

Egg, when he heard his son's decision, looked like a hurt child; but to Nicky's eager self-justifica-

tion—'All other chaps of my age went months ago'—he opposed no argument. To outward appearance he took it, as Nicky said, mildly. But a silence fell upon him; fell and enveloped him. He had grown the least bit garrulous with age, or rather with the second youth, the Indian summer, that had blossomed from this happiness of having Nicky and Jane and the farm to care for; he never wearied of last year's crops and this year's prospects and of explaining how if Blossom went to the bull on her right day she'd be in full milk just when Pansy would be drying off. Others may sometimes have wearied of listening, but he did not weary of talking. But now the tide of his speech was dammed up, or had stopped flowing. Nicky went away in mid-September, the day after the ram was raddled and loosed into Flinders. Egg and Nicky drove to Mercester in the milk-float. Scowling self-consciously the young man gripped his father's hand. 'Well cheerio Dad! I'll write and tell you how I get on.' But Egg only grunted and stared at the old pony's ears; and presently he was in the station-yard, alone with his three milk-churns.

From that day, though he did not neglect the farm, Egg lived in a profound solitude. While he could he watched with a fatherly care over Jane, who, carrying a new life within her, faced day after day, week after week, and nothing certain beyond, with dumb and smiling courage. But even Jane's need, the more that it was never obtruded, did not always compel him from his grey reverie. Too

often, for days together, he forgot her; and from these periods of absentness he would return full of unuttered and unavailing self-reproaches. Nowadays, whatever his intentions, he could not but shut himself up with his circling thoughts. Of one thing he was assured: no great harm would come to Nicky, soldier though he was. Others might suffer abominable things, but not Nicky. In due time Nicky would come back home right as a trivet: of that there could be no doubt, as, again and again, with an almost angry emphasis, Egg told himself. Meanwhile the work of the farm constantly claimed him, and in that he found, as he had found before, a sort of comfort.

With no one to help them but an old man, Roger Bunt, and a youngster well under military age whom they called Beechy, Egg and his daughter-in-law had plenty of work to do. Jane, who was locally famous for her butter and cheeses, did much of her own milking as well as the work of the house; and Egg made the sheep his special care. The ram's belly had been raddled with red, and at a fortnight's end nineteen of the thirty-nine ewes had been touched with that colour. Then they must put blue on him and try again; and, if any ewes remained still untouched with another fortnight gone, there must be a third raddling and this time with black. By means of this triple raddling the ewes could be grouped, so that you knew within a little when their lambs would be born. Indeed there was no lack of things to be doing. Six acres of clover sward had been ploughed in and was now,

in October, ready for the wheat that should follow. It was time, too, to sow the oats; and the mangolds and turnips, two and a half acres of them, must be pulled before the frosts came. 'Swedes, we can leave 'em be,' said Roger Bunt. 'They'll take no harm. So the young master's gone for a soldier, eh Mr Godfrey sir?' The former tenant of the Ridge Farm had been a Godfrey, and Roger had no head for names. His mind worked slowly: Nicky had been gone a month before he found it necessary to speak of his absence, and then it was as if the news had only just reached him. And another absence troubled him now. 'So Sarah Bunt she went off this morning. She's been long going but she's gone now, I spose.' Egg stared at his man questioningly, but Roger, having pulled a few more turnips, went on with placid melancholy: 'Thirty months or more, and aches and pains back and front, poor soul. And now she's gone. . . . Prettiest thing you saw, forty year ago, and a rare 'un for skipping. I've knowed Sarah Bunt since she was *so* high, Sarah Williams she was then, and we've buried our five and raired our three. Queerish her going off like that, and things won't be quite the same I dare say. . . . It'd be three o'clock last night, as near as no matter, she give a sort of skrooking, and when I got a candle, reckon she's going this time poor soul, and when I got a candle, sure enough there she was stark and staring and not a word to say when I talked to her. You fair daunted me, I says, with that skrooking, and now you'm gone, poor soul, and no candle to see

by. . . . Middling good turmuts these are, Mr Godfrey sir.' That was Roger Bunt at his most garrulous, a patient lump of old manhood, younger by several years than his master but looking a great deal older, his body bent by habit towards the earth that had claimed all his labour and would one day claim himself. Beechy, the boy about the place, was young and raw and not very sharp in his wits; for the sake of his mother, who had once lived in sin and was now denied poor relief, he was paid a good deal more than his worth to the farm. Apart from Jane, these two, the old man and the boy, were Egg's only companions. Young neighbours sometimes came—Fred Curtis and wife from down the road, or the Marsdens from t'other side of Keyborough—to sit in a bunch round the fire and between vast intervals of silence discuss not only the price of cattle cake, and what Mr. Ambrose had said to Miss Price of the Grange, but something that was now almost equally important—the news from France. The war did not stop, shewed no sign of stopping. It couldn't of course go on much longer because . . . well, it couldn't, could it? The Government had already begun to interfere, and there were rumours of a more drastic interference to come. Meanwhile the war went on and work went on. Fat bullocks fetched a fine price; the poultry promised good profit this Christmas; and soon the October sowings were thrusting spears of green into the cold December light.

Nicky was still in England, taking lessons in homicide and sometimes heartily wishing he could

begin practising on the persons of his instructors. There were all sorts, good and bad, among the chevrons; and it was easy, if you considered for a moment, to distinguish the voice of conscientious authority from the snarl of the mere cad in office making the most of his chance. A ubiquitous type, this last, recruited either from the ranks of old professionals or from the gutter. During his first few weeks in khaki Nicky found that he had committed himself, body and soul, into the hands of a federation of bullies, who bawled and screamed and shoved at him and his fellows from morning till night, and were assisted in their endeavours by newly recruited toadies eager to escape the whip by learning how to use it. Nicky was sensitive and lacked philosophy; he was too young not to feel degraded when he suffered insult without protest. Denied the relief of action, for it would have been witless to resist this absolute and mechanical tyranny, he took refuge in anger and contempt. The war discovered in him an unexpected capacity for hate, but it was not the enemy that he hated When from the height of a month's experience he watched still newer recruits being turned into tame cattle by men who would themselves never go out of England, he thought: What's the good of killing Germans if we leave this muck alive! But his letters home revealed nothing of this bitterness. 'The N.C.O.'s are a pretty tough lot and they keep us on the go, but our corporal, I mean the one in charge of our barrack-room, is quite a decent chap. I dare say the officers are all right, but we hardly

ever come within miles of an officer except on parade. They're too sacred to be seen often. Imagine us all standing to attention in the middle of a muddy swamp staring respectfully at distance and hating the Hun like old boots. Then there's a sort of hush. Something's going to happen. It might be the Second Coming by the fuss they make. And then he comes—not Jesus Christ after all, but a lad of eighteen or nineteen, sort of little Lord Fauntleroy, nicely washed and brushed up and keeping a very stern look on his face so as not to burst out crying. I expect he likes the S.M. about as much as we do, poor devil. He looks so lonely standing there, like the johnny in the song. But he has to come and look at our chins all the same, and if there's any sign of a beard we're shot and if there isn't any sign of a moustache we're hanged. This war is to be won by moustaches it seems. It's a Barber's War. I don't think I shall try for a commission—it would mean starting all over again with a new lot of chaps, and we've got sort of used to each other now and with any luck we shall all get out together . . .' No mention of Christmas, which came bleakly and passed unregretted, a mock-festival for Egg and Jane, and for a million others.

Egg, taking what comfort he could from these letters, would not listen to his fears; and the effort not to listen was perhaps the subtlest and cruellest feature of this waiting. He was glad when, in February, the first lot of lambs began coming; and in the enthusiasm of shepherding them he forgot

for a while the necessity of telling himself, with ceaseless iteration, that the war would probably end before Nicky's training was completed. Grey mornings would find him in the field they called the near orchard, going from one pregnant ewe to another. 'You'll not be long now, will you, missus? And how many d'you think *you*'ve got, old lady?' He looked to have some sixty lambs from his thirty-nine ewes. When twins or triplets were born he rejoiced because they swelled the numbers; and when there was but one he rejoiced because the singles were bigger and would get fat before the others did; he was determined to think well of his sheep. By timely interference he helped many a weakling into the world, saved the life of many a mother; and then, not without reason, he was wonderfully pleased with himself . . . until he remembered that the war, so soon to end, had not ended yet. He forgot to think of these stupid suffering beasts as so much farming stock; he found relief in worrying about them as though they had been his own kind. When a lamb was stillborn he pitied it, and pitied its mother; when a sheep died, as happened in the first fortnight, he was grieved as well as disconcerted. In reflective moments he knew it was absurd and illogical, since what he handled was only so much potential mutton; but the knowledge made no difference to his instinctive attitude.

No sooner was he deeply absorbed in this occupation than something happened to interrupt him: Nicky came home. Nicky came home for his

draft leave: a visit sudden and brief as the flash of a sword, for the boy was away again, bound for the Western Front, while Egg's eyes still dazzled with the cruel splendour of his coming. That same night, unable to sleep with Nicky gone, he got out of bed, dressed, lit a storm lantern, and went out to the near orchard. The air was crisp; a half moon shone. In the lee of a hurdle a newly born lamb, moist and steaming, was trying to struggle to its legs. Its mother lay exhausted in her straw bed; but, as Egg watched, another ewe, heavy with the womb's burden, came nuzzling up to the newly born with eager triumphant bleating. Egg gave her a gentle tap on the nose. 'Think again, Nellie. Your turn's coming, my dear.' He looked again at the lamb. 'A grand one, you are. And I'll get back to my bed.' Rising from his knees he recalled what had prevented his sleeping, and he thought he would never sleep again. But in this belief he was wrong: he slept, and the morning brought new courage. There was no time for moping: had he not Nicky's farm to look after? He loved to think of the place as Nicky's, and he resolved to make a fine thing of it while the lad was away soldiering. He pictured the homecoming: Well my boy, we've not wasted time, us old 'uns! Meanwhile the new root crops were ready for flat-hoeing; in less than a month there would be between two and three score lambs to tail, and a score or two to castrate; and, before March was out, the four-acre field, where last year's roots had grown, must be sown with barley and clover.

3

Outside, as they all knew, the evening was softly bright after rain; but here, in the dugout, darkness ebbed and flowed, eddying round a flicker of candle-flame. The water that dripped through the roof into Private Pandervil's dixie made a resonant *ping* which Frensham pretended to recognize as A-flat. Two lice, of unknown origin, occupied the men's attention. The first was plump, and shone with an ivory lustre; the second, more leggy, suggested (said Nicky) a slave-galley; both were crawling diagonally across the front of a military knapsack. 'Two to one they meet!' said Corporal Harris. For the lice had started from opposite corners and were moving with geometrical precision, so that it was a nice point, well worth the consideration of any sportsman, whether or not they would reach the apex of the V at the same instant and so meet.

'Take you in tanners, Corporal,' cried Frensham.

'No you don't, Frogs! We ain't all bloated capitalists. Pennies for us.'

'Pennies it is,' agreed Frensham, 'and you're losing 'em, me lad.'

Someone lit a second stump of candle and waved it aloft. Seven faces clustered over the arena.

'The money's yourn, Frogs,' said Harris, adding, with the greatest good humour, 'Hope it chokes you, you old fecundator!'

The plump louse was now crossing its rival's path at a distance of about half an inch. The bet-

ting began again: which would reach its corner first? The lad called Smiff cried out, in his shrill, newsboy's voice: 'Me for the little fat bleeder. 'E's got guts, 'e 'as. Nothing showy about 'im, eh Corp? Carm on Frogs, give us one of your sayings nah!' Frensham ignored this artless tribute. ' 'Ere Goody boy, evens on the little fat bleeder? Take me on?'

But Goodwin was a cautious fellow. 'What are you betting?'

'All I got,' said Smiff. 'All I bloody got, me boy. Can't say fairer. A packet of gaspers.'

'Issue?' asked Goodwin.

'Right first time,' said Smiff.

'Well, you know what to do with 'em, don't you!' returned Goodwin in a sad voice.

The candle moved. 'Keep the glim still, carncher!' said Smiff. 'You'll frighten the poor lil fings.'

The plump louse won the race. 'Good on yer, matey!' said Corporal Harris, cracking the victor under his thumbnail. 'You've earn me fourpence.' Goodwin scooped up the vanquished on the blade of his jack-knife and held it in the candle-flame.

'Win or lose,' remarked Frensham, idly watching this slaughter, 'it's all one in our war.' He exchanged a grin of understanding with his friend Pandervil. 'A plague on both your louses!'

Nicky sat waiting. For a year or so now, life had seemed to consist largely of waiting, from the first taste of hell in the Recruits Depot to this

sitting-out game in the trenches: waiting for uniform, waiting for 'clobber', waiting for parades to begin and to end, waiting for the tide of screaming abuse to subside, waiting for trains, waiting for medical inspection, waiting for punishments, pack drills, 'C.B.', sanitary fatigues, pay stopped, waiting for rations, waiting for pay, waiting for pass, waiting for draft, waiting for the next order. He was unfeignedly glad to be in the trenches again: the people at the Convalescent Camp had seen to it that he should be glad of that, though indeed the place was a paradise compared with the ordinary Base Depot. He was back in the trenches among men he had got used to, and under officers and non-commissioned officers who had other things to do than organize persecution of the rank and file. Here was danger and terror and filth and infinite aching monotony, but here, too, was a sense of comradeship that rendered the obscene adventure of war by one degree less ignoble.

Nicky waited. In a few hours he was to steal out across No Man's Land on a patrol. He was not thinking of that: he had learned the art of enjoying ease when one has it. But underneath his surface thoughts he was waiting for the ordeal to begin. Either I shall be killed or not, so why worry? Perhaps I shall be dead by to-morrow; perhaps I shall be dead by this afternoon; perhaps I shall be dead before five minutes have passed. He had schooled himself to face this idea of imminent death not only without flinching but with a certain detachment, as though it were something that

scarcely concerned him. Sometimes, when shelling began, he said to himself coolly: It may be this one. But when it was over, and he still alive, he could never be quite cool about that: there was always surprise in the thought, and joy, and a cruel —quickly suppressed—hope of home. Jane was now become something inconceivably lovely, in whose existence he could hardly believe. He dared not let himself think of her, and he could not, after a while, remember her face, except in dreams when he saw her—as he had seen his chum Tony Grant five days ago—mutilated and writhing and screaming for the favour of quick death. She too had faced death and had given him a son, now ten weeks old; and he tried in vain to stifle the hope that when this particular little binge was over he might get ten days' leave to England. He stared at his vision of a world gone mad, and he waited. He waited for the convulsion to cease. He had a rifle, a bayonet, and a revolver; and not infrequently he was entrusted with bombs. All this seemed to him the very height of stupidity . . . but the war went on and on, and he did as he was told, indulging secretly—it was the only outlet he had for the rage that consumed him—in much flamboyant rant. Will it ever end? Not till we're all maggots. And then p'raps the old blokes at home'll be satisfied. Grand march past of the victorious army down Whitehall with the band playing and the flags wagging and the girls getting randy. All present Sa'ant Major? All present and correct sir! They don't seem to move very *smartly*, Sa'ant Major, I *must* say! No sir, you see sir, the

fact is sir, they're MAGGOTS sir! Is that so Sa'ant Major! Why what a glorious war it must have been! I'm sorry it's over by Gad! So are we all sir. . . . Meanwhile we soldiers sit at ease and search our shirts for lice. Rhyming with mice. But not with rats, which is a pity. They like this war, the rats do, it's a jubilee for 'em. Corpses, one of, passed to you for necessary action please. Brother Worm and Sister Louse, bless the master of this house. Ever since he met a shell, he has gone to live in hell. Or in heaven to dwell, as the case may be, according to his rank and station. Leaving these well-ventilated premises for favour of your kind occupation. Rhyming with station. But not you, you little leaping bastard . . . dear flea, gentle jumper, do I wrong thee when I say that thy father and thy mother were not joined by Holy Church? Anyhow you're dead now, so blast you! . . . Jane. I wonder what she's doing now. The last of the milking p'raps. And we've got a son—with *my* eyes too. Just in time for the next war, he'll be. That's fine, Jane. Feed him up my dear. And when he's fat enough we'll ram him into the cannon's mouth for King and Country. Oh and God too of course, but he comes a bad third. I wonder what he thinks of this war. Pooh, nothing at all; why should he? A little difference among cheesemites doesn't concern *him*. 'Does it, Frogs?'

'Does who what?' asked Frensham.

'I was wondering what the Authorities think about this little do of ours.'

'The brass hats, the red tabs, the dooks?'

'No. The haloes. Them Above.'

Frensham winked. 'Can't say. But I hear they've interned the Holy Ghost. They say he's related to the Zeitgeist, a notorious Hun.'

'Oh shut yer fuddy rah for Crysike!' It was Godden, with his customary snarl. 'You two rudders make me fuddy-well sick. Fink yerselves fuddy clever, doncher. Well I fink you're a fuddy pair of fuddy sops, see!' He turned to his fellow-Cockney, Smiff. 'Say Smiffy, did I ever tell you about that 'ot lil piece of stuff I pick up dahn E-Taps. 'Ere mamselle I says, do you . . .'

Smiff groaned with extravagant emphasis. 'Not agyne, boy! Not agyne! Go on talking, Frogs. Don't know what you're talking *abaht*, but it's a treat to 'ear you.'

'Yes, isn't it?' said Frensham. 'Give us a song, Smiff, there's a good lad.'

'Oh damn songs!' put in Nicky. 'Let's hear you sell your papers, Smiffy.'

Smiff grinned happily at this invitation, and the next instant he was the newsboy again, calling his wares in an English street: 'Late Final. Century by Jessop.' His shrill voice held its own gallantly against the rumble and crash of the bombardment —the piping of a bird in a thunderstorm. Everyone listened with bright eyes and a heart full of civilian memories.

Corporal Harris, grinning wistfully, gave utterance to the general sentiment. 'It don't 'arf take yer back, don't it! Good old Smiffy!'

Nicky, outwardly taking part in this merriment,

sat alone in himself and waited, waited. Across the chasm of separation he saluted, humbly and with love, the bright spirits surrounding him: Frensham the lawyer, who like himself had been Grant's friend; Harris, once a decent steady-going drayman, now a conscientious soldier; and Smith, the lad this moment entertaining them; illiterate and gay and innocently foul-mouthed. Nicky felt that he knew these three men with a profound intimacy: in imagination he detached them from the war and set them against the background of their former so different environments. Frensham he respected for having lived on the fringe of that literary world which he himself had once longed to enter (but he, Nicky, had done with that nonsense: all he wanted now was the home he had left, precisely as he had left it, nothing altered; and he dared not, even in his thoughts, ask for that). Harris, a married man of forty, was as simple as Frensham was sophisticated. Sometimes he talked of his wife and children, who were, it was easy to see, the cardinal facts of existence for him, the motive force behind three parts of his activity; and sometimes he talked of the French brothels which —for you never knew where you'd be to-morrow— he seldom failed to visit when the chance offered, being (it seemed) blissfully unaware of any inconsistency; and so, thought Nicky, making a sudden discovery, there *isn't* any inconsistency for Harris; he's innocent as a babe, old Harris is; his sins are of the flesh and trivial. Not like that gloating swine Godden! And Smiff, with his

sharp-featured impudent puckish face, was like a terrier with its tail always on the wag; and when he, emulating Godden, began talking of the girls he had 'gorn wiv', the effect was richly diverting: Ariel—a Cockney Ariel—pretending to be Caliban. The rest meant little or nothing to Nicky. Goodwin was habitually morose: a clerk born and bred, a clerk by habit and by inclination, he would never smile again till he could wear striped 'trousering' and a pen behind his ear, and say to the Teashop waitress: 'I want a nice cup of coffee, please miss!' knowing well that all coffee came from the same urn. Macdonald was a square-faced taciturn Presbyterian Scot; and Godden was Godden, a mere part of war's incidental beastliness.

And still, under these thoughts and recollections, Nicky was waiting. The boom and hiss of the enemy's fire, the rumble and crackle and shriek—these sounds drifted away and died down, till at last they seemed but the echo of a distant warfare. The earth ceased shuddering, and it became difficult to decide whether what one heard was external or merely remembered. The spirit of Nicky Pandervil crouched in its form like a hare: not frightened, not hoping, not moving, but alert and listening, awaiting the invisible event. Disregarding this silence within him, his random thoughts ran on. If there *is* a God, why doesn't he get a broom and sweep us all away? Such a mess as we are. Or clap strait waistcoats on the lot of us? When Satan heard about this war they say he just turned sulky. Hi Satan, says God, what are you

doing there you idle scamp! Me, I've packed up, says Satan; them Christians o' yourn are doing *my* job: 'taint fair. He's seen better days, Satan has; a bit rough in his speech now; not quite the gentleman. But the same good chap at heart. Him the Almighty Power hurled headlong flaming from the ethereal sky. But it was only a sham fight—charades to fool the children with. Meaning us. After it was all over they met round the corner and had a good laugh at our expense. The poor gulls, they said, the poor silly gulls! They're singing hymns to me now — do you hear 'em Satan? Hosanna in the highest—that's a good 'un, that is! And God nudges Satan and Satan winks at God and this dear bloody little war goes on. As flies to wanton boys, ti-tum ti-tum ti-tum, they kill us for their sport. That bit's right anyhow. They kill us for their sport. . . . But, said Nicky to himself, sobering a little, there isn't Anyone—at least not to matter, not that we know of. There's no one even to laugh. That makes it worse somehow; lonelier. I wonder why dead bodies get so swollen? It must be gas. Like a damn great balloon it was—as though it was trying to be funny. And succeeding, what's more. How the chaps laughed!—at first: afterwards they didn't laugh. Fancy people doing *that* to each other—Shakespeare and Beethoven failing to agree. Just a little quiet discussion conducted with machine-guns and what not. To convince you of your mistake, Shakespeare, I'll have a bang at you with this nine-pounder. To make my meaning clearer,

Beethoven, I'll stick this bayonet through your musical guts. Poetry putrefaction music and maggots, and God Save the King. The argument's over and honour's satisfied—what a stink! That's the worst of this warm weather: honour won't keep.

A voice like tearing iron called from above: 'Pandervil! Smith!'

'Here, Sa'ant!'

'Here, Sa'ant!'

The voice had jerked them to their feet. 'Double up, lads!'

'Come along, Smiff!' said Nicky. 'The gallows is ready.'

He scrambled up into the trench, Smiff following. Others were waiting in a whispering bunch for them. 'All present?' said the Sergeant. 'Now listen here.' Nicky listened to the instructions with but half his mind, though he easily mastered them: the other half was occupied with its own affairs. He must do this and that, and on no account the other: his brain responded instantly, as with a click: everything being arranged he moved forward with mechanical precision. I'm a clockwork man, he thought; and I wonder how long we shall last once we're through the wire. The night's not dark enough for this job, blast their eyes!

With that oath, the first and last of his panic fear was expelled: there remained only a tautness of the nerves and a fierce cold concentration on doing what must be done. I must get through this job, he thought; but his thoughts dared not

give the reason for this imperative. And now they were through the wire and crawling on their bellies towards the enemy lines. The grass smelt like Coppett's Piece; the wet earth was fragrant; and a cool autumn wind, with a delicious hint of wood smoke in it, came to meet him. Someone coughed in the far distance: friend or enemy? A light shot up into the sky, hovered and splayed. The world seemed suddenly ablaze with light, and Nicky felt as though he were transfixed upon a table with a thousand knives poised above him and a thousand pairs of eyes hating him. He gulped back his heart, and lay very still, and waited. The field grew dark again, but he did not move. I'm still alive, how extraordinary! There was no intellectual gall left in him now; that talkative self, that anger, was peeled away, leaving his spirit exposed. But, pressing his belly closer against the ground, he felt fear draining out of him and a host of silly little thoughts came pattering in. His eyes were wide open to the darkness: like a rabbit, he thought; and he remembered how often he had stood and watched the little beasts squatting outside their warren and had wished that he needn't bother to shoot them, and, wishing so, had wavered in his aim—stupid waste of shot. He lapsed into a state that was more than half dreaming, from which he was presently recalled by a crackling noise. The machine guns were beginning. Someone's getting excited, he thought, grinning hysterically into the grass; we're putting the wind up 'em. He crawled slowly on, hardly knowing

why. Backwards or forwards, it made no difference which way. He could hear the bullets dropping all round him, and he pictured the air as a grey veil being torn to shreds. The crackle suddenly ceased; he felt warm blood oozing from his ears; the ground rose up and flung him into the air. Christ O Christ they've got me . . . There was nothing left in the world but pain. If it gets worse than this I can't bear it. But it got worse and he was still alive. Worse and then worse; and then he was somehow a little detached from it and thinking of other things. He closed his eyes and drifted . . . and when he opened them again the sky was reddening. I'm in a shell-hole; it's morning. He noticed presently a pool of rainwater. Have I bled all that?—the same question as he had asked once, in childhood, of his father, feeling important and rather proud. He remembered that time. Venturing to move his head a few inches, there's been a scrap, he said; and recognizing a friend he tried to say aloud 'Hullo, Smiffy!', but the effort made blood gush out of his mouth. Smith stared blankly with a surprised comical grimace; and made no response, his head and one shoulder being all that was left to him. They've made a mess of you haven't they; and Nicky closed his eyes again. It's apple-harvest at home, he thought. He was very tired. Jane I want you. He had never been so tired before. I say, Jane, just look at what they've done to old Smiff.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH

THE LAST DAYS

I

Old William Smart, who had recently caused scandal by changing wives with his brother and appearing to be none the worse for it, called to have a chat with his neighbour Pandervil one bright autumn morning, and to warn him of what that dratted government fellow was a-doing. Egg leaned on his yard gate enjoying the sunshine; William Smart sat at ease in his pony-cart holding the loose reins.

'Has he bin to see you, Mr Pandervil?'

'Not yet. What should he want with me, Mr Smart?'

'Want?' Mr. Smart chuckled. 'What won't he want? He'll want to run y'r farm for you, that's all he'll want.' Mr Smart seemed to think this a prime joke. His china-blue eyes shining, his face creased with merriment, he was a pleasant-looking old scoundrel. It's a pity, thought Egg, that he leads such a bad life with his drinking and worse. 'Run y'r farm, that's all,' repeated Mr Smart.

'Oh, will he indeed!' said Egg. 'I don't know as I shall be so easy about that. This is my son's

farm, Mr Smart; my son Nicholas. He's in France, is my son, fighting to keep a whole skin on this young jackanapes of an inspector and the like. What's *he* doing out of khaki?'

'He's doing what I say, sir. Whoa Topsy! Stand still, my lass! What's he doing? Showing us old 'uns how to grow corn. And *where* to grow corn, what's more. D'ye know what I did last week? You don't?'

Egg shook his head, hoping to hear nothing he'd have to disapprove of. You never knew with William Smart. Not content with doing wicked things, as likely as not he'd tell you about them and expect you to enjoy the story as much as he did. A genial fellow and an amusing companion: no one disputed that. But the impudence of him! The impudence of his expecting decent people to have any truck with him at all, and him a man who behaved as though he didn't know what sin was! That he was a regular churchgoer made his conduct the more infamous: it provided dissenters with an excuse for being publicly thankful that William Smart was not of their persuasion. To the saintly it was a wonder, not to say a scandal, that the Lord had not cut him off long ago; they were hard put to it not to declare outright that the Lord was unpardonably lax in this affair. Egg, though innocent of malice, liked to keep abreast of current gossip; he knew pretty well what was being said of old Smart, and he was doubtful whether to encourage him to tell any more.

'Well, what I did last week was this. I'll tell

you, neighbour. I took and ploughed up the Vicarage lawn.'

'What! That fine old lawn! You never did, surely!'

Mr Smart was pleased with the effect of his news. 'Yes, Mr Pandervil, a fine old lawn it was. You're right there. But I ploughed it up, and double ploughed it up, and the Vicar stood by smiling like a Christian martyr.'

'He dint prosecute you?' Egg was puzzled, though not nearly so puzzled as he looked. He liked to amuse himself with a little benevolent hypocrisy. 'He dint try to shoo you away?'

Mr Smart laughed joyfully. 'Not at all, neighbour. He thanked me.'

'Thanked you!'

'What's more, he *paid* me.'

'Well well,' said Egg, in mock despair, 'wonders will never cease, they say. Now whaddid he want that fine lawn ploughed up for? Wants to grow his own bread, eh?

'Just so. Patriotism, don't you see? Each and all we must try to do our bit, Mr Smart, says the Vicar to me. Each and all, Mr. Smart. This is *my* little bit, and I hope the example may be followed throughout my parish. The country needs food. The country needs more corn . . . That's what he said, or near enough. But not all, not by a long way.'

'Indeed? What more did he say?'

'Told me a thing or two he thought I ought to know. No matter. No matter.' Mr Smart smiled

at a memory, and eyed his neighbour wistfully, as a man will who wants to talk indiscreetly and is not sure of his audience. 'How's yours keeping, Mr Pandervil? Mrs Nicholas and the grandson.'

'Eh, thank you. Pretty well.' Egg's eyes shone. 'He's a fine strong boy. Full of life he is, and beginning to take notice of things already. Always got a smile for his grandpa.' This was Egg's special subject, and he couldn't leave it. 'You should see him hold out his little arms when the candle comes near, or anything o' that. Of course he can't *hold* anything yet, in his fingers I mean, I don't mean he throws back, not more than's only to be expected. He can't, I mean, *catch* hold of things: he drops 'em. But that's to come. I remember my son Nicky was the same. Dessay they all are, but I remember noticing Nicky. But sharp as sharp. He won't miss much I'll wager. A good head on him, the very spit of his dad.'

'Ah yes.' Old Smart nodded kindly. 'What news of the boy?'

'Seems he's right enough. We don't hear much just now. The last we had was one of these Field Postcards. You know 'em, I expect. Scratch out what don't apply: that's the idea. Better than nothing. But there was talk, there *was* talk——' He paused: should he tell or not? Was it tempting fate, to publish the glorious hope? 'There was talk of a bit of leave soon, to look at the baby, you know. He wasn't sure, but he said he'd try for it.'

'That'd be soonish, I expect?'

The hope made Egg almost breathless. 'Almost

any time,' he said, with strained quietness. His heart pounded noisily; he saw old Smart through a mist.

'A bad bad business, the war,' said Smart, staring at his pony's ears and shaking his head slowly.

'Um,' said Egg. 'But it can't go on for much longer now.' It was half a question. He watched for the reply.

'Ay, a bad business,' repeated Smart.

'I give it another three months,' said Egg, anxious to provoke an opinion from Smart, whom now, suddenly and for no clear reason, he regarded as an oracle. The turn of phrase, so foreign to his own way of thinking, was borrowed from younger and more confident prophets, who ever since the war's beginning had been generously giving it another month or two. The months of its duration now numbered twenty-six, but Egg's appetite for prophecy was undiminished. He always listened eagerly to such discussions, and treasured in his memory all the more hopeful things that were said. He himself was not, in general and in public, optimistic about the war: rather was he apt, in conversation, to take a gloomy view, so that others might contradict and convince him. Instinctively, without thought, he cultivated the art of making people say about the war what he most wanted to hear, his method varying, of necessity, with the disposition of his interlocutor. With William Smart he dared to sound a hopeful note. 'I give it,' he said again, 'another three months.' And getting no answer he was forced

to add: 'How does it strike *you*, Mr Smart?'

Smart deliberated. 'Well, what I say is this: when the end does come, it'll come sudden. That's my view. Don't ye think so, Mr Pandervil?'

Balked of his desire for a comforting prognosis, Egg lost interest in the talk. 'Mrs Smart well?' he asked civilly, not unwilling to make an end of it.

'Thank ye. Ay, she's middling well.'

Egg made a noise of polite gratification. 'Glass of cider, Mr Smart?'

At this invitation the visitor got out of his cart, tethered the pony to the gatepost, and walked across the yard with his neighbour in the direction of the cider-barrel. He tasted the cider and found it good. 'A bit of good stuff this, Mr Pandervil. Here's luck, sir, to you and yours!' Having emptied the glass he waved away his host's suggestion of refilling it, and stood ruminating. 'You asked me a question I'm not often asked, Mr Pandervil.'

'Eh?' said Egg. 'What was that?'

'Yes, you did. A neighbourly question. How's Mrs Smart keeping, you said. Now that's a question I'm not often asked.'

Egg felt uncomfortable, suddenly remembering the great Smart scandal. At the beginning of the conversation it had been prominently in his mind, but Nicky and the war had driven it out. 'Sure you won't have another drop o' cider?'

'Not another drop. I dursn't, neighbour. Old Topsy'd run away with me if I'd two glasses of *that* sparkler in my belly. Well, your remark

about Mrs Smart minds me of what the Vicar said, time I ploughed up his lawn for 'im. I've bin hearing a strange tale about you and y'r brother, Mr Smart, he says; a strange tale and a sad, says he. So I waited and waited to hear what this strange tale might be, but seems the Vicar was shy, for he um'd and ah'd and coughed before he could get out a word of it. I hear, Mr. Smart, you no longer live with y'r wife: is it true? Yes, it's true enough, I said, this is the way it happened—And you a churchman, says the Vicar, never missing a Sunday! What do you come to church for, man? Well Vicar, give us a chance, sir: a man can't break with all his bad habits at once. But he wouldn't smile, not him, but must needs go on to say how that's not all he heard, and then, *oopsa*-daizy, out comes the story of me and brother Bob. It was this way, Mr Pandervil. Me and my wife, Alice by name, took and drove over to have a bite of supper with Bob and Katie. Alice and Katie are sisters, and Bob and me, being much of an age, courted 'em together. We were getting along for fifty then, and I'd been married before, but Bob was new to it. Nice girls both, and 'twas touch and go which of us had which. Well, I was saying, we drove over to see Bob and Katie back in the summer, a matter of three months ago, and it just popped into our heads, all four of us, that a change was as good as a rest. So up you get, Katie, says I, bundling her into the trap, and if you're as good a girl as y'r sister you'll do, for there's something about you . . . Well we joked a bit on the way

home, but time we come in sight of the house seems Katie 'ad been thinking it over. Doesn't seem hardly right, William, me coming with you like this. Not right, why what's wrong with it. I'm not such a bad old fellow and there's but twenty years between us. It's not that, William, there's no harm in you, healthy and spry you are, and I've always had a kindness for you if it comes to that. But I'm not your wife, and talking won't make me so. Wife, my dear! You're wife enough. You're Mrs Smart, aint ye? And I'm *Mr* Smart. So what's wrong wi' that? . . . So off we went to bed, if you please, and she soon got into the way of it, did Katie, and she's here to this day and asking no better. But there's not so many folks as speaks after Mrs Smart in a neighbourly way like y'rself, Mr Pandervil.'

Egg was taken aback. He did not know what to answer. Here was most flagrant sin rioting unchecked, and he, against his will, was being made almost a party to it. He grunted; and bent down to examine the tap of the cider barrel.

'Ah,' said William Smart. 'And I dare say *you* think I'm a wicked old rascal, too, eh?'

Egg stood up and met a searching glance. 'Wicked, yes. It's wicked enough, there's no gainsaying. But that's between you and them and . . . well, and the Almighty, I spose, if it's my opinion you're asking.' Profoundly embarrassed, and wishing he had said nothing, he went on hastily: 'None of my affair anyhow. *I'm* not God, and don't set up be. Now just you come

and look here, Mr. Smart, at my cowshed.'

'Cowshed? Why, what's to do with the cowshed?'

'You'll see, you'll see!' As they crossed the yard to the cowshed Egg became excited with triumph, anticipating the day when he would enact this same scene with Nicky. For an instant, having his back to William Smart, he pretended that this was Nicky following him. 'There, Mr Smart. What d'ye think of that?'

'Well, well, well!' Smart was impressed. 'I shouldn't know the place. Never seen it looking so clean before, and I've known the Ridge Farm, being a neighbour, for a matter of forty year.'

'New concrete floor, y'see, with a trifle of slope on it,' said Egg, anxious that no feature of the change should be overlooked. 'You see that, Mr Smart?'

'Indeed, I do, sir. Indeed I do. *And* a runnel for the muck. That'll make all the difference, that runnel will.'

Egg's heart warmed to the man. 'Making everything shipshape, don't you see,' he confided, 'against the boy's coming home. Got this cowshed up my sleeve, as they say. A little surprise for him.'

Smart nodded. 'Well . . .' He hovered a moment; then nodded again, and was away, stamping back to his pony and cart. Egg lingered awhile, his eyes enjoying the sunlit yard and the many-gabled house, until he remembered that it was about time for the postman to come with the

second delivery: unless, he said to himself as he hurried in, my watch has gone and got fast again. 'Jane, where are you, my dear?' She was not in the kitchen, and he was about to call again, but checked himself lest he should wake the cradled child, whose life, as yet, consisted of little beyond feeding and sleeping. She'll be out at the front door watching for the postman, he thought, and, going to look for her there, he began preparing himself for the possibility, even the probability, of there not being a letter this afternoon. Most days he and Jane were disappointed, and were put to the trouble of pretending, each to the other, that they hadn't expected anything. He tried now to discourage the silly hope in his breast, that tiresome fluttering bird; but, no matter what he said, the creature wouldn't rest, wouldn't be still, wouldn't stop singing its lovely nonsense.

He found Jane in the road, receiving a letter from the hand of the postman. The impudent dog was staring at her rather curiously, Egg thought. What the devil does he mean by it! A fine girl she was, a fine hearty girl, and being a mother had enriched her charm. But she was Nicky's wife, wasn't she!—and not one to be stared at by this moony-eyed postman. She was Nicky's wife, and Nicky's father clicked the latch of the gate with angry emphasis.

'Is there a letter, Jane?' His tone was almost peremptory.

Even then, confound it, she didn't instantly look round. She was saying something to that fellow.

When she did turn she confronted her father-in-law with a strange face, a stubborn child's face he thought it. She came to him with Nicky's letter in her hand, took his arm, and contrived to smile.

'Stared at you, that man did!' said Egg.

'What man?' Her face seemed to close again; its habitual candour had vanished.

'That postman, who else!' Egg's voice was sharp. 'What's he want to stare for!'

'I didn't notice,' said Jane. She hadn't yet opened her letter, though her eyes were fixed upon it. 'Let's go in and read what he says, Dad.'

They went through the kitchen together. Jane, tearing the envelope open, paused to examine the censor's pencilled signature in the left-hand corner. Egg was impatient. What's the matter with the wench, he asked indignantly. Don't she *want* to read her letter! She drew the letter from its sheath and stared at the first page. Her face was wooden. Suddenly she pushed the letter towards him.

'You read it first, Dad.' Egg, nervously polishing the lenses of his spectacles, shot a quick surprised glance at her. 'I must go to Eggie,' said Jane. 'He's crying.' She ran from the room.

Egg had heard no crying. He was mystified and suspicious. But here was Nicky's letter for him to read, and his fingers trembled as they approached it. It would be a family letter, with a little private one, doubly folded, for Jane alone. How unlike Jane to be so cool about a letter from France. That absurd hope still fluttered in his

breast: perhaps this was to say that the boy would soon be back home, on a ten days' leave, or even, perhaps, that the end was in sight. But no, it was the usual letter, saying nothing much, bits of Nickyish fun here and there but on the whole rather mechanical in its cheerfulness. A disappointment, as letters always were. Egg had been disappointed in this way so many times before, but he had not yet mastered his lesson, he had not yet learned to save himself pain by abandoning hope. He left the letter lying on the kitchen table, and turned away feeling empty and defeated. He had eaten his cake, every crumb of it, and was still hungry. There was nothing to do but go on waiting.

2

But indeed there was much to do, and next morning he and his men were busy in the orchard filling their baskets with Camleys, a small dark-green apple much grown in South Mershire and very plentiful this year. It was a private point of honour with Egg to do his share—rather more than his share—of stripping the taller trees, because the having to climb the ladder, stood as it often must be against a swaying branch, challenged his courage; he dreaded the ordeal, and for that very reason would not shirk it; he had been nimble enough at this work in his boyhood, and he was resolved to prove to himself, against all reason and despite all appearances, that he was as

young as he used to be. This morning the world was fresh to his sight and fragrant to his nostrils; standing on his ladder in the heart of an apple tree, with the laden boughs enclosing him and the ground a green patch dizzily far below, he half-believed himself a boy again. Leaning dangerously this way and that, towards such fruit as hung beyond easy reach, he worked on until the basket was so heavy that the forearm from which it hung throbbed with pain, and the shoulder ached and the hand longed to loosen its clutch on the ladder. Before beginning the hazardous downward journey, he must pause, nevertheless, to taste once more that queer vision of a bright sky trickling through the gaps in the green roof; and when he was safely back on the ground he looked about him with wondering eyes, seeing the orchard saturated with his own history. It was not that he recalled in this moment the incidents of that history; faces from the past did not throng into his vision, nor voices long silenced sound in his ears; it was rather a quality that he perceived, the distilled essence of a vanished yet real and existing time; he felt the orchard as personal to him, one with him, part of his intimate life. The feeling came and went like a breath, and then he was thinking how they must look sharp about getting the wheat sown. Next week'll be soon enough. I must give Roger a hand wi' the roots again; he's not as quick as he was this time twelvemonth, and he was never what you'd call quick.

Next day, after breakfast, at which ceremony

Jane excused herself from appearing (what ails that girl? he thought; there's something mighty queer about this!), Egg made ready to drive into Keyborough with a load of fruit for the market; for some of the more enterprising local people, Nicky among them, had started a Poultry and Fruit Market that was held every fortnight at a place very handy for Keyborough Station. The packed boxes were heavier, it seemed to Egg, than they had been last year, and Beechy, who helped him with the loading, was even more stupid than usual. Egg began to fume and fret in the privacy of his mind, being still, by lifelong habit, too gentle to give verbal vent to his impatience. We shall be late, that's what we shall be, I know we shall. And the more he worried the more his back ached, and the less able was he to cope with the complication of difficulties which this once simple-seeming task confronted him with. 'Come along, Beechy. Look alive, my boy.' Beechy, grinning and blushing, fumbled with the harness; his master, in a state of controlled frenzy, snatched the belly-strap from him and after two abortive attempts succeeded in fastening it. 'That'll do. You be off now and help Roger with those roots, boy.'

The last straw was added to his burden of exasperation by Jane, who suddenly darted out of the house to intercept him. 'Must you go to market this morning?'

He stared at her crossly. 'Must I go to market! What d'ye mean, child?' There was a plot against

him. She thought him too old for his work, too old to manage his son's farm: the suspicion was gall to him. 'What else should I be doing, pray?'

'I wish,' said Jane—she was red-eyed, she's been crying thought Egg, but her face wore now a mulish look—'I wish you'd let *me* take the fruit in this morning. You didn't ought to do so much.'

'So that's it!' He thought his guess confirmed. 'Well, let me tell you, m'dear, I can manage well enough yet a bit. Not many could at my age perhaps, but I can. See?' In spite of his annoyance he smiled at her kindly. I'm a difficult old fellow to lead, that's what she's thinking, bless her little heart! And so I am, and so I will be. 'You run along in like a good girl,' he added, seeing she made no movement to go, 'and cook me a nice dinner against I get back.'

Still Jane did not move. 'Let me come with you then.'

'Why?' He began losing patience again. 'What's come over you?'

'I want to come,' said Jane stubbornly, 'that's why.'

He eyed her pale face intently. 'You're not ill, are you, my dear?'

'I'm not feeling so well. I don't want to be left alone. There!' she said eagerly, 'now you've got it, Dad. So just wait while I get my coat on.'

Egg did not quite believe this story of not feeling well, though her appearance was consistent

with it. He felt that she was hiding something, 'And who's to see after the little'un, tell me that.' Ah, he thought, that'll have cornered her.

'Mary's here. Mary Curtis. She'll be staying with him an hour or two till I'm back. She came and offered.'

'Mary Curtis here! First I've heard of it,' complained Egg. 'Seems you've made y'r plans, my girl.'

'And I can be back in time to feed him when he wants me,' she quickly added.

'Oh, very well . . .' Egg grumbled acquiescence, still peevish to think that he was being managed; but during the drive to Keyborough, a matter of fifteen to twenty minutes, he forgot his grievance and was free to notice with more solicitude how silent and listless she was. Still, women were like that sometimes, poor things, and I dare say, he said, there's no call to worry. 'Got a headache have you Jane?'

She brightened at once, but with a brightness that seemed not quite natural. 'Oh nothing much! I had a letter from Mother this morning. Did I tell you?'

'Indeed you did not.' He wondered why she had not told him of this; for any letter was an event, something to talk about and share.

'Yes, and what do you think! She's expecting a baby, Mother is.'

'A baby. Where from?' Engaged with his problem Egg answered absent-mindedly. He knew, as everyone did, that twelve months ago Mrs

Marsh had consoled herself for the loss of Jane by marrying George Withers, an old admirer; but the meaning of Jane's news did not immediately penetrate his anxious reverie.

'Where from? What a question!' Jane smiled, though wanly. 'Her own, I mean. She's going to have a baby. Just fancy!'

'God bless my soul!' Egg laughed to himself. 'Lemme see, how old would y'r mother be now?'

'She's just forty-five, according to my reckoning. What a surprise for everyone!'

'Forty-five, eh? Well, Nicky's mother was forty-nine turned, I remember, and a bit more, when Nicky was born. Some folks say old parents have poor children, but Nicky wasn't so poor.' He smiled at a memory. 'When he was little I sometimes used to bath him. A sturdy child he was, although they pretended he was delicate. Stuff and nonsense. . . . No, I wouldn't a called Nickey a poor child. And I wouldn't call 'im poor *now*. Whadda *you* say, Jane, eh?'

Jane did not seem to have heard the question, for she had turned her back on him and was burrowing mysteriously among the cargo of apples. Disappointed to find her not responding to his sentiment, he said no more. He did not even ask Jane why she sat so silent, her face half-averted from him; for he was becoming impatient of the mystery. She's not enjoying the trip: why did she come? He remembered that postman and the way he had looked at her—almost a loving look, you could a called it, and there she was, with

Nicky's letter in her hand, and dint seem to care whether she read it or not. Not a very cheering letter, he reflected, no more talk of leave in it, but nothing to be so put out about. I give it up; they beat me, women do. Ah, there's Allchurch. 'Morning, Mr Allchurch! Fine morning!' He turned his horse's head into the market square, glad to see that he was arrived in good time after all.

'Morning, Mr Duke!'

'Morning, Mr Pandervil!'

Duke seemed surprised to see him. So had Allchurch, now he came to think of it. What was the matter with them?

'Jane, did you see how those two stared?'

'Did they?' asked Jane. 'I don't think they did. Just your fancy, I expect.'

'I tell you they *stared,*' insisted Egg, petulantly. 'I've got eyes, haven't I? Take a look at me, Jane. Is there anything wrong wi' the look of me?' He fingered his collar and tie, and, finding nothing wrong there, jumped out of the cart and called to one of the market porters to come and unload for him. At the sound of his voice a group of men standing near stopped talking and looked up at him. On their faces he read the same baffling story. He returned their stare angrily, and they instantly looked away, looked uncomfortably away. Feeling more selfconscious than he had felt since boyhood, he strolled round the market, nodding to this man and speaking to that and discussing prices with a third; and he was nettled to

find Jane always at his elbow, a preposterous Jane, a talkative Jane, altogether too eager to chip in, and sometimes pulling at his sleeve and whispering some nonsense about his catching cold if they stood too long chattering. Trying to make an invalid of him! And he had never, he swore, felt better in his life, except for these pains that beat in him, with the beating of his heart, whenever he dared to imagine Nicky's return.

3

Jane's silences, by making him feel shut out of her confidence, forced Egg to indulge these fond imaginings more freely than was his habit. During the next few days he was for ever starting conversations that would lead to Nicky if carried far enough, and Jane acquired quite a knack of cutting them short without apparent violence. But it can't go on, she said, *I* can't go on; and on the eve of the next market, which was Mercester market, sooner than endure another public ordeal she resolved to make an end of this silence between them that was now, like a dividing sword, so sharp and glittering a thing. The curtains were drawn, the lamps lit. Nicky's child was asleep upstairs; Jane and Egg sat warming themselves by the kitchen fire.

'I wonder what the boy's doing now,' said Egg, more than half to himself.

Jane rose from her chair. 'I must tell you some-

thing, Dad. I thought to keep it back.' Her voice was cold; he could see that she trembled. She came and stood close by his chair, put a hand on his shoulder, and kissed his forehead.

'Well, my dear?' He patted her hand.

She spoke again, but in a different voice. 'We'll need to be brave, darling. It's Nicky, he . . . he won't be coming home to us.' She leaned nearer to him, pillowing the aged head on her bosom. Maternal, she was old as the earth, and he, bewildered, a child in her arms. 'I had the message Monday. Four days and nights I've had it.'

He was restive in the embrace. He put his hands on her shoulders and held her at arms' length, gazing strangely into her face. 'What d'you mean?' His voice rose. 'Say it again. Something about Nicky coming home.'

She faced him, and was firm. 'He's not coming home. They've killed him.'

He stared stupidly. 'Not Nicky. Not *killed*. There's some mistake.'

'Here's the letter,' said Jane.

A white shape fluttered under his eyes. He pushed it away.

'Not Nicky!' he insisted.

He could not bear this truth; with all his being he rejected it. The walls of the kitchen were misty; they crumbled, they grew dark, and he felt himself falling into a great pit. He was walking down a long grey tunnel, and he could hear the pad pad of pursuing feet, but from which direction they came, whether overtaking or meeting

him, he could not decide, and while he stood with cowering head expecting something to leap on him the tunnel became a shaft going straight down into the heart of the earth, but if I can only get low enough, he thought, if I only run fast enough down the hole I shall get to Australia or somewhere and make a fresh start with the grocery, if only I run fast enough, but he was now in a bottle, packed tight and corked in, and a huge hand lifted the bottle up and an enormous eye stared at him, like a big goldfish, he muttered, and wondered whether the thing with the eye could hear him and wondered how soon the hand would draw the cork and drink him out of the bottle, and at once a large mouth came into view and the cork began squeaking, there was an explosion, he felt himself foaming out of the bottle's neck and crawling over a large pink finger of which the pores were as big as rabbit-holes, and if I fall into one of 'em, help! help!—but it was already too late, he had fallen, he was falling still, into a great pit, and now he was in a long grey tunnel that bored through the earth, he thought, and if only I can run fast enough and get to the other side and make a new start in life, with firelighters so cheap and all the customers satisfied, if only I can get out of this bottle . . . A voice came, gentle and soothing. 'Just a drop more! I've got you safe.'

The mist wavered and vanished, and he could see a young woman bending over him. It was she, no doubt, that had spoken. Her right arm pillowed his head, and her left hand held to his lips

a teacup from which rose the fumes of brandy. A fire tingled in his throat. I've been ill, he thought, I've been run over. Obediently he swallowed a little more brandy. He stared dazedly, first at the young woman, then at the room: at the brick floor, at the dresser full of shining crockery, at the fire on the hearth. How did I get here?

'Have I been ill?'

'You sort of fainted, that's all.' The young woman smiled; a wonderful kind face, he thought, and smiled back at her.

'Fainted? First time in my life!' He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to puzzle things out. 'Where's Carrie? Does she know—about me fainting, I mean?'

'It was only for a minute,' said the young woman. 'And you're not quite yourself yet, darling,' she surprisingly added. 'But you're better. Your colour's coming back.'

To be called darling by this lovely young stranger gave Egg a very queer feeling, and the thought crossed his mind that perhaps he was dreaming or had died and was now in heaven. Am I young again? I feel young. The kindness shining in her face made it impossible for him to take his eyes off her. He could well believe her to be an angel. And she recalled to his mind someone who had been very precious to him.

'I feel,' he said, 'sort of funny. I don't seem to quite know what's been happening and . . . where I am. And I don't seem to know *you*, young lady.'

'You don't know *me!*'

Her cry, whether of pain or fear he hardly knew, made him feel ashamed of having blundered into speech. Staring, he searched his mind for some clue to her. He clutched eagerly at a fancy. 'Are you . . . you're not . . . you're not Monica, are you?' The name, so long unspoken even in his thoughts, surprised himself.

'I'm Jane, of course. You know me, Dad. Of course you do. I'm Jane.'

'Jane?' His face fell. 'I don't remember . . . now what Jane would that be, my dear?'

'Oh dear!' He saw that she was distressed. 'Your Jane. Nicky's Jane. Jane Pandervil.'

'Oh!' A light began dawning in his eyes. 'Then you're my little sister.' He spoke his thought aloud. 'So it *is* heaven, because,' he argued triumphantly, 'you died a year or two back, didn't you, Jane!' He got out of his chair and gaped round the room. 'And this is our old kitchen again.' His glance coming to rest at last on Jane, he marvelled anew: nearly fifty when she died, his sister Jane was now, in this blessed place, a young girl. 'Are they all here, Mother and Willy and all?'

'Listen!' she said, taking his two hands in her own. 'I'm Nicky's Jane.' Fear stared from her eyes. 'Not your sister, your daughter-in-law.'

'I don't understand.' He felt puzzled beyond endurance, and hurt, and on the verge of tears. His mouth trembled.

'Your son Nicky. I was his wife.'

Egg frowned. Was she playing some silly trick on him? 'No son of that name.'

'Think, Dad. Try to remember. Your youngest son, Nicky.'

'No,' said Egg. 'I don't know what makes you say things like that. Harold's my youngest. Eleven, Harold is; and his brother Bobbie's fourteen. And'—his face grew anxious—'where's Carrie? I want to speak to Carrie.'

The young woman who called herself Jane had sunk into a chair and was quietly crying. She answered him through tears. 'There's no Carrie here. There's only me.'

'Don't cry, my dear.' He put out a thin hand and stroked her bowed head. 'You meant no harm. But I *must* be getting back to my wife, don't you see, or she'll be flying into one of her tempers.' He paused, his hand still resting on the girl's head. Could he tell her more? She seemed the understanding sort: not one to be shocked. 'You see, young lady, my wife's what they call expecting, almost any day now it might be. And at her time of life, which is near fifty, folks can't be too careful with themselves.'

Jane, wiping her eyes, resumed her patient maternal role. In this moment she envied him. She was both bitter and glad. I'll let him be: 'tis best so. She addressed herself to the task of persuading him to accept his strange situation and go to bed and think no more for a while of Carrie and the unborn child.

'Now, Dad, please to take a good look at me.'

'Why d'you call me that?'

She ignored the question. 'Please to take a good look at me, Mr Pandervil. You don't think I mean you any harm, do you?'

Looking into her eyes he could not think that. 'No, my dear child.'

'Very well then. Now, listen . . .'

Ten minutes later she led him to his room. 'If you want anything in the night, I'll be within call. I'll be just over there. You won't forget?'

He promised, gratefully, not to forget: bewildered though he was, there was still room in him for gratitude. She lightly kissed his cheek and left him, and he stood musing in a strange bedroom: strange yet not quite strange, for after staring about him, and looking out of the window into the dove-grey night, he at last realized, recovering the savour of an old experience, that this was the very bedroom he had shared with his brother Algy a lifetime earlier. That remote past lay stretched before his mind's eye like a self-luminous pictorial map. His memory, keen-edged, cut through the deposit left by the years of his Farringay exile, and discovered to him the intimate features of the former time. Seems like yesterday, he thought. But it isn't: I wasn't much moren a boy those days, and now I'm a man turned fifty-three; nor did he think to glance at the dressing-table mirror, from which would have looked back at him an old, time-written face with sunken cheeks and a child's eyes dark with wonder and perplexity. It was a problem, but that other

and more urgent problem left him not at peace to consider it. How came he to be here at all; who would see after Carrie and the shop in his absence; and who was this young woman, this Jane, so gentle and beautiful? Yes, she's beautiful, she takes me back . . . And she's a rare kind one, whoever she may be. He slowly undressed and got into bed: a strange bed, he thought; it's queer to be sleeping alone; and he pictured himself lying awake all night worrying conscientiously about Carrie.

But he did not think of Carrie for long: he fell into a half sleep, in which pictures flowed endlessly past him and a voice babbled. Jerked awake from time to time by a convulsive movement of his body he found that he himself was the author of this babble. He hungered for deep sleep, but his mind thronged with images for which some chatterbox in him, the moment he released control, was quick to find a monotonous accompaniment of words. He heard his thoughts rattling along and was powerless to stop them. Willy in the Cavalry. Don't be a gert fool, Willy. Killed, poor butty, and all because that bitch of a girl likes red. May I send 'em for you, ma'am—oh, no trouble, no trouble at all, no hubble and bubble at all. I called you a beast, Father, down in the kitchen I did, a beast and I want you to beat me, please, and make me a good boy, Crussuk Amen. An' all kind friends, Monica Wrenn. Let's go the orchard way, grass and water the orchard way, it's longer. Ladies go nim nim nim . . . grass, water,

fountains, mountains . . . mountains of milk and snow.

In the morning, before it was quite light, the door of the bedroom opened. He sat up, startled. But he was not surprised to see Jane, for he had not slept: under the surface ripple of fancy he had remained awake all the time, awake and aware without ceasing of the strangeness of what had befallen him. He was eager for explanations, so eager that he could hardly listen to Jane asking how he had slept and saying that here was a nice cup of tea for him.

'How did I get here? I want to know. I must know.'

'Yes, yes,' she said soothingly. 'Would you like to get up to breakfast, like you always do?'

'I want to know. I've a right to know. I'm not a child.'

But not till he was washed and dressed, and had broken his fast, would Jane begin to answer his questions with anything beyond evasions. Like a child he sulked a little, and like a child he suffered himself to be coaxed into good behaviour. She stayed with him while he dressed. 'I'll look out of the window, Mr Pandervil. So you needn't be shy of me.' But she stood, not by the window, but in front of the mirror, which, presently, when she fancied him absorbed in his own thoughts, she picked up and carried out of the room.

'Whad you do that for?' he demanded, on her return.

She pretended not to understand.

'That looking-glass. Why did you take it away?'

''Tisn't safe,' said Jane, 'that's why. It'll fall over one day and break. And that's bad luck, they say, breaking a looking-glass.'

'H'm!' He was not satisfied. 'How'm I to shave myself then?'

'Now don't be quarrelsome, *please!*' She smiled winningly. 'I'll see about your shaving, after breakfast. You've been a tiny bit ill, don't you see, and I've to take care of you.'

At the breakfast table, after he had eaten all he could be persuaded to take, the questions began again; and now Jane tried to answer them. A score of times she had to say: 'No, please don't interrupt. Let me finish. I'm only trying to help you.' And when she had told, without mention of Nicky, all she knew, the old man sat staring at her with pain and vexation in his eyes.

'So there isn't any Carrie. Is that what you're telling me?'

'She died years ago. Nearly ten years.'

'And I'm . . . I'm an old man, eh?'

Jane nodded, biting her lip.

'How you can sit there,' cried Egg, 'a nice girl like you, a nice *kind*-looking girl I'd have said, how you can sit there and tell such *lies*. . . !' He brought his fists down on the table with a crash, making the crockery jump; and tears began streaming from his eyes.

4

Before many hours had gone by he felt bitterly ashamed of that outburst, for he could see that it had frightened the young woman. He tried to make amends, arguing, entreating, and sometimes, seeing what a youngster she was, humouring her whim. For indeed she was very young, not much above twenty-two or three, and already a widow, poor thing: her husband, she told him, had been killed at the front not a week ago. It's bin a long war, he reflected sadly: those Boers are harder nuts to crack than we thought 'em. And she had a child to care for, a bonny little chap: did that make it better or worse for her? Better, he supposed: it would help to keep her mind off her trouble; and when, back from roaming perplexedly but not unhappily the once familiar fields of his old farm, he chanced to surprise her in the act of suckling her babe, the beauty of the picture—the mother bending, the child clinging—drew tears into his eyes. But talking to her proved a sad waste of time. She would not listen to reason, but clung stubbornly to her fantastic story. It seemed to Egg more and more probable that the shock of that recent bereavement had unsettled the poor lass's wits. He resolved that during his stay with her—and he had quite forgotten to make plans for getting back to Farringay—he must try to be very patient and kind.

At noon the comparative serenity of his mood was shattered by the visit of a man from Mer-

cester. 'This is the doctor, darling. He wants to have a talk with you,' said Jane, slipping her hand into his. Darling again! Egg would have none of her darlings and pettings. He was suddenly suspicious and afraid. This fellow was too sleek and suave; too knowing by half; he meant mischief.

'Good afternoon, Mr Pandervil. We've met before, you know. I helped your young grandson into the world only a while ago.' Egg would not answer. He was convinced now that whatever he said would be used to prove him mad. He was cornered; the world was against him. 'Yes, we've met, Mr Pandervil. But you don't remember me, do you? You're a bit dazed.'

'P'raps I am a bit dazed,' said Egg. Surely it was safe to admit that much.

'Ah,' said the doctor, 'I know the feeling well, I should just think I do. When I was a student I was very keen on biking. No one pushes a bike nowadays: it's all this motor stuff. Well one day I smashed into a brewer's dray, and it knocked me silly, I can tell you. Couldn't remember who I was or what I was when they picked me up.'

Egg was listening intently, but he made no response.

'What I needed,' went on this talkative doctor, 'was a good long rest . . .'

Something sinister in that phrase broke down Egg's rigid self-control and sent him tottering towards Jane, whose arms opened to receive him. 'You won't let him put me away, my dear? You

wouldn't do that, would you?' He clung to her shoulders. 'I'm sane. I . . . I think I am.'

'You're as sane,' said the doctor, 'as I was after that accident with the bike. A night's good sleep is what you want first of all. Lucky for me it wasn't a boneshaker I was riding.'

Egg, with a twinge of shame for his bad manners, put fear away from him and remembered his duties as host. 'Shall we all sit down?'

'Thank you.' The doctor sat down.

'I remember those boneshakers very well,' remarked Egg, 'though I'd never trust myself on one.'

'Don't blame you,' said the doctor heartily. 'The only one I've seen was at a music hall . . .'

He began to talk about the music halls of his youth. His eyes kindled with pleasant memories . . . and ten minutes later, quite liking the fellow by now, Egg offered no objection to having his pulse felt, his heart examined, his temperature taken.

'And these little pellets,' said the doctor, rising at last to go, 'are to help you sleep. Take one or two, not more than two, just before you get into bed. With a little water or milk . . . And may I come and see you again to-morrow? Thanks, then I will.'

The young woman, though she still cast anxious glances at him, seemed on the whole happier for the doctor's visit. But Egg was not happy. That doctor had meant well; he was harmless and good-natured and no doubt clever in his own way. But

he was siding with this deluded or deceiving girl; though no mention had been made of it Egg knew that the doctor, too, would have him believe Carrie dead, and himself, Carrie's husband, an old man. As to that last theory, there was one way of proving it nonsense, thought Egg with a flash of his former anger; and, as he moved quietly out of the room, he looked sidelong at Jane, thinking how cunning it had been of her to take the looking-glass away from him.

Which bedroom should he look in first? Not his own and Algy's: it wouldn't have been put back there. Sarah's perhaps, or Flisher's. Undecided, and fearing detection, he stood listening for the footsteps that he feared might follow him, the voice, gentle but authoritative, that would forbid him; but after an anxious moment, remembering the room that his mother and father had occupied, he tiptoed down the passage and grasped the handle of the door. He pushed open the door, went in, and raising his eyes saw a figure crouched, a face that watched him, giving back stare for stare: the face of a very old man whose chin bristled with white stubble. Egg gasped and drew back, clutching at his temples. The movement was reflected; he understood. A cloud came between himself and himself in the mirror; came and enfolded him in a darkness through which, moved by an unknown compulsion, he tunnelled his way up towards a speck of light infinitely far above. The tunnel was vertical and slippery; its sides were sleek and moist like a dog's nose, but he,

against his will, was sliding up it, he couldn't stop, up and up, with his head craned back flat against his neck, and his sick gaze turned towards that point of light, that dagger piercing to his very brain, he thought, and I don't want to go up, I want to go down and get to Australia and make a fresh start with the grocery, but now with a rush he was at the top of the shaft, and the light was burning and blinding him . . . He came to himself.

5

He came to himself burdened with the conviction that Jane was hiding something from him. Her behaviour with the postman, her behaviour at the market—it was a great worry to a man, and even his astonishment and alarm at finding himself stretched on the floor of Nicky's bedroom could not distract him from the worry. How did I get here? Must have fainted or something. And what time of day is it? He glanced at himself in the wardrobe mirror and tut-tutted when he saw that he had forgotten to shave. He was profoundly puzzled. The last thing he could remember was sitting in the lamplit kitchen with Jane; and now it was daylight. He looked out of the window. It seemed like afternoon; but it was giddy work gazing at strong sunlight and he was glad to turn his eyes away. I must go and see what that Roger's about. I've had a bad turn, there's no doubt of it. It doesn't do to leave things to other folk. There's the wheat to be sown; and quickly, or

we'll get behind with things.

Having decided that it was afternoon, he wondered whether the postman had come and whether there was anything from Nicky. Moving cautiously, for he had quite the feeling of having been rather ill, he began descending the stairs, but was forced to stop and sit down half way, overcome by giddiness. He clung desperately to the bannisters, forlorn and frightened but pretending to himself to be jaunty. Mother Noom, he muttered, she met her death falling downstairs, did Mother Noom; I mustn't do that, I mustn't die yet a bit, there may be a letter from Nicky downstairs. I must get down somehow; can't sit here all day. His head drooped to his knees, and after a while he felt the giddiness passing and was able to resume the hazardous journey. Holding on to the bannisters he shuffled on his bottom from stair to stair, not trusting himself to stand until he was safely down.

He stood up. The house seemed to sway a little, but not so badly as before. Hugging the wall he made his way slowly towards the kitchen, the room most in use, hoping with all his heart that Jane was not there. Likely enough she'd be in the dairy or the wash-house. He hoped she was not in the kitchen, for she was hiding something from him and there might be a letter from Nicky. He remembered something about a letter, remembered vaguely how a white shape had fluttered before his eyes like a huge butterfly; and now, gaining the kitchen, and finding it empty as he had wished, he

paused and looked round, as if nosing for scent. A letter from Nicky, and Jane was keeping it from him! The likeliest place was the broad window-sill where Jane kept a miscellany of the things—encountered in her periodic tidying-up—that did not seem to belong to any other place; a church calendar embodying a coloured picture of the Good Shepherd, a pile of household bills held down by an eight-ounce weight, cooking recipes cut out of the *Mercester Chronicle*, and a sixpenny packet of stationery. Ashamed to be prying, but still indignant and resolved, he searched for five minutes among these things without finding anything to the purpose. And now the mantel-shelf, he thought; he felt breathless, for this delay was edging his excitement with anxiety. But before turning to the mantel-shelf he lifted Jane's work-box from its place on the sill, and there, where the box had been, lay a sheet of folded paper.

Ah, what's this! He unfolded the paper, flattened it on the sill, and fumbled for his spectacle-case. A letter from the War Office, he could decipher that much, but the rest was blurred to his weak sight. He found his spectacles and put them on. That's better! That's splendid! Now, let's see what they . . . What's it mean? Killed in action . . . killed . . . that means he won't come back . . . poor Willy! But before he had read the letter to the end his mind was clear again. He stared into the idiot face of outrage. My son Nicky, my little son . . . now you're fit to kiss the ladies, Nicky . . . O Jesus let me die.

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